

THUNDERSTORM FEARS AND PHOBIAS

We don't know exactly why some pets become afraid of storms. We do know it is a common problem in dogs, less so in cats. The fear can soon become a phobia, which is defined as a persistent, excessive, and irrational fear response. In the case of thunderstorms, pets may also be fearful of storm-associated events such as a change in barometric pressure, lightning, electrostatic disturbances, and even smells associated with the storms. Noise phobias can include fear of thunderstorms, firecrackers, gunshots, and even the sound of a smoke alarm or microwave beeping.

A recent study found that certain breeds have an above average risk of developing noise phobias. These include many of the working and sporting breeds such as Collies, German Shepherds, Beagles, and Basset Hounds. This survey was quite small, however, and more research needs to be done in this area. The study also found that dogs that had separation anxiety were more likely to also have noise and thunderstorm phobias.



Sometimes a noise phobia may be traced to a particularly bad experience, but most often no triggering event has occurred. In almost all instances, the fear of noises and storms escalates, worsening with each exposure. Soon the pet may become fearful of similar sounds or events associated with the noise. For example, a pet afraid of thunder may also become afraid of rain and the gentlest shower can elicit panic.

The owner's attitude can influence the severity of the fear. For instance, if owners themselves are nervous during storms, noise phobias in their pets may occur more often or become more severe. Similarly, if the owner attempts to comfort the animal, the animal interprets it as confirming there really is something to be afraid of. The petting or comforting is really positive reinforcement of an undesirable behavior.

Different animals may display different signs of noise phobias which include:

- Panting, pacing & drooling
- Hiding (most common sign in cats)
- Trying to escape (digging, jumping through windows or going through walls, running away)
- Trembling or shaking
- Chewing
- Defecating
- Dilated pupils
- Expressing anal glands
- Not eating
- Attention seeking
- Urinating
- Vocalizing (barking or meowing)

There is no guarantee that a noise phobia can be totally resolved, but in many instances the fear can be managed effectively. The effectiveness of treatment depends on a number of factors including the severity of the phobia; how long the pet has had it; whether it is ongoing, seasonal, or unpredictable; and the amount of time the owner is willing to commit to the behavior modification techniques.

The first thing to remember is that you should refrain from giving rewards or punishment during the thunderstorm. This is extremely important. Petting, consoling, or even saying, "It's OK," may be interpreted by the pet as a reward for the fearful response. In the event of comforting a dog during a storm, for example, it may signal to the pet that the storm really is something he should be afraid of. Similarly, the pet should not be punished for showing fear. This will only increase his anxiety level. Usually treatment includes three other facets: medications, changing the environment, and behavior modification.



Medications often help bridge the gap between realizing there's a problem and long-term training modification to help your pet through the phobia. In some instances, the medication may be administered during an entire thunderstorm season. Others may be given when a storm or noisy event (Fourth of July fireworks) is expected. A common protocol is to give a slow-acting anti-anxiety medication during the storm season and a quick-acting anti-anxiety medication when a storm is predicted. Alternative therapies have also been used with some success. These include melatonin and flower essences such as Rescue Remedy. These two therapies take effect within an hour of administration, and should be given prior to the storm or other fear-producing event. Don't forget; natural & herbal medications are not safe for every pet – always check before giving supplements.

Increase exercise levels that day. The pet should receive vigorous exercise daily and more so on a day when the fear-producing noise is likely to occur. The exercise will help to tire the animal, both mentally and physically, and may make her less responsive to the noise. In addition, exercise has the effect of increasing natural serotonin levels, which can act as a sedative.

Reduce or block the noise levels by use of "white noise," such as running a fan or air conditioner. These may aid in blocking out some of the fear-producing noise. Playing a TV or radio can have a similar effect. Allowing the pet access to the basement or a room without outside walls or windows may decrease the noise level. Closing the windows and curtains can also help reduce the noise.

Create a safe haven. Some pets feel more comfortable in a small space such as a crate or a small room like a bathroom (run the fan and leave the lights on). Some pets seek out the safety of the bathtub or shower during a storm. (Some have hypothesized that a pet may feel less static electricity if on tile or porcelain.) If the pet is comfortable in a crate, the crate can be covered with a blanket to add to the feeling of security. The door to the crate should be left open and the pet should not be confined to the crate, which could dramatically increase the stress level. Some pets, especially cats, may find that a closet or area under the bed makes a good retreat.

Project a calm, confident attitude. Pets are very aware of the mental state of their owners. If you are worried or nervous, this will add to the pet's fear. Your pet will look to you for direction, so keep an "upbeat" and "in charge" attitude. Be jovial & confident.

Counter-condition. Using counter-conditioning, the animal is taught to display an acceptable behavior rather than an unacceptable one as a response to a certain stimulus. In this way, a negative stimulus can become associated with a positive event. For instance, the only time the pet gets his most favorite treat, game, or toy, is just prior to and during a thunderstorm. Dogs that enjoy traveling may be taken for a car ride, or cats who love catnip, may be given their favorite catnip mouse. (Dogs who enjoy swimming will need to wait inside until the storm is over!) After a time, the pet will start associating an oncoming storm with getting to have his favorite thing.

By using desensitization the animal's response is decreased while he is exposed to increasing levels of the fear-producing stimulus. For noise phobias, the animal is taught to be calm when the noise level is low, and then the noise level is gradually increased. This process is generally more successful in dogs than cats. To desensitize a pet to thunderstorms:

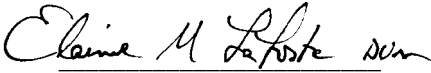
1. Obtain a CD of a storm (www.soundsscary.com amongst others), or digitally record one yourself (commercial products generally work better). Play the recording at normal volume to determine if it will induce the fear response. If it does, continue with the desensitization; if not, you will need to obtain a different recording. For some animals, a recording alone may not work, since there may be a combination of occurrences that provokes fear, e.g.; thunder plus lightning or changes in barometric pressure. For these animals, darkening the room and adding strobe lights may more closely mimic the storm, and may need to be included in the desensitization process.

2. Play the recording at a volume low enough that the pet is aware of the sound, but it does not induce a fear response. For instance, the ears may be cocked towards the source of the sound, but you still have the pet's attention. In some instances, that may mean the pet needs to be in a different room from where the recording is playing. While the recording is playing at the low level, engage the pet in an activity in which you give the commands, such as obedience training or performing tricks. Give food or other rewards during the activity when the pet accomplishes what he is supposed to. If the animal shows signs of fear, stop and try again the next day, playing the recording at an even lower level. It is important that the pet not be rewarded while he is fearful or anxious. Sessions should last about 20 minutes.
3. If the animal does not respond fearfully, during the next session, increase the volume slightly. Again, involve the pet in an activity and reward it for obeying commands. Continue increasing the volume gradually for each session. If the pet starts to show fear, decrease the volume. Repeat the sessions in various rooms of the house and with various family members present.
4. When the pet does not show fear when the recording is played at a loud volume, you may want to try playing the recording for a short time while you are absent. Gradually increase the time you are gone while the recording is playing.
5. When the pet appears to have lost his fear, the sessions can be reduced to one per week. In most instances, these sessions will need to be repeated intermittently for the life of the pet.
6. During an actual storm, use the same activities and rewards you used in the training sessions.


To increase the chances of successful desensitization, the training process should take place during a time of the year when the actual noise will not be encountered: if the pet is afraid of thunder or fireworks, try desensitization during the winter; if afraid of gunshots, the training should take place outside of the hunting season. In most instances, it is best to discontinue any behavior-modifying medications during the desensitization process. Consult with your veterinarian before discontinuing any medications.

Fear of thunderstorms and other forms of noise phobia are common problems in dogs and in some cats. Administering medications along with changing the pets' environment, and using behavior modification techniques can help ease the fear. Above all, do not give your pet any attention or reward when he is showing signs of fear; this will only reinforce the fearful behavior.

Good luck! Please let us know how we can help.



Elaine M. La Forte, DVM



John Kearney, DVM