



Fearful Dogs

You can help make sounds less scary to your dog.

Firecrackers, thunder, and other loud, out-of-nowhere sounds often leave dogs frightened and wanting to flee to a safer place.

These types of fears may develop even if your dog has had no traumatic experiences associated with the sound. Many fear-related problems can be successfully resolved. If left untreated, however, your dog's fearful behavior will probably get worse.

Outlet for anxiety: destruction and escaping

The most common behavior problems associated with fear of loud noises are destruction and escaping. When your dog becomes frightened, she tries to reduce her fear. She may try to escape to a place where the sounds of thunder or firecrackers are less intense. If she feels less afraid by leaving the yard or going into a certain room or area of the house, then the escape or destructive behavior is reinforced because it successfully lessens her fear.

For some dogs, just the activity or physical exertion associated with one of these behaviors may be an outlet for their anxiety. Unfortunately, escape and/or destructive behavior can be a problem for you and could also result in physical injury to your dog.

Fear by association

Your dog may also begin to associate a particular startling noise with other things in her environment, and she may grow afraid of these other things because she associates them with the loud noise that frightens her. For example, dogs who are afraid of thunder may later become afraid of the wind, dark clouds, and flashes of light that often precede the sound of thunder.

Dogs who do not like the sound of firecrackers may become fearful of the children who have the firecrackers or may become afraid to go in the backyard, if that's where they usually hear the noise.

What you can do

Method 1: Create a safe place

Create a safe place for your dog to go to when she hears the noises that frighten her. But remember, this must be a safe location from her perspective, not yours. Notice where she goes (or tries to go) when she's frightened. If possible, give her access to that place. If she's trying to get inside the house, consider installing a dog door. If she's trying to get under your bed, give her access to your bedroom.

You can also create a "hidey-hole" that is dark, small, and shielded from the frightening sound as much as possible. Encourage her to go there when you're home and the thunder or other noise occurs. Consider using a fan or radio near the spot to help block out the sound. Feed her in that location and help your dog associate that spot with other "good things" happening to her there. She must be able to come and go from this location freely. Confining her in the "hidey-hole" when she doesn't want to be there will only cause more problems.

The "safe place" approach may work with some dogs, but not all. Some dogs are motivated to move and be active when frightened and "hiding out" won't help them feel less fearful.

Method 2: Distract your dog

This method works best when your dog is just beginning to get anxious. Encourage her to engage in any activity that captures her attention and distracts her from behaving fearfully.

Start when she first alerts you to the noise and is not yet showing a lot of fearful behavior, but is only watchful. Immediately try to interest her in doing something that she really enjoys. Get out the tennis ball and play fetch (in an escape-proof area), or practice some commands that she knows. Reward her with praise and treats for paying attention to the game or the commands.

As the storm or other noise builds, you may not be able to keep her attention on the activity, but it might delay the start of the fearful behavior for longer and longer each time you do it. If you can't keep her attention and she begins acting fearfully, stop the process. If you continue, you may inadvertently reinforce her fearful behavior.

Method 3: Behavior modification

Behavior modification techniques are often successful in reducing fears and phobias. The appropriate techniques are called "counter-conditioning" and "desensitization."

These techniques must be implemented very gradually, and they condition or teach your dog to respond in non-fearful ways to sounds and other stimuli that have previously frightened her.

Be careful using behavior modification: If these techniques aren't used correctly, they won't be successful and could even make the problem worse.

Begin by exposing your dog to an intensity level of noise that doesn't frighten her and pairing the noise with something pleasant, like a treat or a fun game. Gradually increase the volume as you continue to offer her something pleasant. Through this process, she'll come to associate "good things" with the previously feared sound.

Example:

- Make a tape with firecracker noises on it.
- Play the tape at such a low volume that your dog doesn't respond fearfully. While the tape is playing, feed her dinner, give her a treat, or play her favorite game.
- In your next session, play the tape a little louder while you feed her or play her favorite game.
- Continue increasing the volume through many sessions over a period of several weeks or months. If she displays fearful behavior at any time while the tape is playing, STOP. Begin your next session at a lower volume, one that doesn't produce anxiety, and proceed more slowly.

For some fears, it can be difficult to recreate the fear stimulus. For example, thunder is accompanied by lightning, rain, and changes in barometric pressure; your dog's fearful response may be to the combination of these things and not just the thunder. You may need professional assistance to create and implement this kind of behavior modification program.

Consult your veterinarian

Medication may be available which can help reduce your dog's anxiety levels for short time periods. Your veterinarian is the only person who is qualified and licensed to prescribe medication for your dog.

Don't attempt to give your dog any over-the-counter or prescription medication without consulting your veterinarian. Animals don't respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for humans could be fatal to your dog. Drug therapy alone won't reduce fears and phobias permanently, but in extreme cases, behavior modification and medication used together might be the best approach.

What not to do

- **Do not attempt to reassure your dog when she is afraid.** This may only reinforce her fearful behavior. If you pet, soothe, or give treats to her when she's behaving fearfully, she may interpret this as a reward for her fearful behavior. Instead, try to behave normally, as if you don't notice her fearfulness.
- **Do not put your dog in a crate** to prevent her from being destructive during a thunderstorm. She'll still be fearful when she's in the crate and is likely to injure herself, perhaps even severely, while attempting to get out of the crate.
- **Do not punish your dog for being afraid.** Punishment will only make her more fearful.
- **Do not try to force your dog to experience or be close to the sound that frightens her.** For example, making her stay close to a group of children who are lighting firecrackers will only make her more afraid, and could cause her to become aggressive in an attempt to escape from the situation.

These approaches will fail because they won't decrease your dog's fear. Merely trying to prevent her from escaping or being destructive won't work, either. If your dog is still afraid, she'll continue to show that fear in whatever way she can—whether by digging, jumping, climbing, chewing, barking, or

howling. Finally, know that formal training won't make your dog less afraid of thunder or other noises, although it could help boost her general confidence.

When all else fails

If your dog has severe fears and phobias and you're unable to achieve success with the techniques we've outlined here, you should consult with an animal-behavior specialist and your veterinarian.

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About Napa Humane

The Humane Society of Napa County and SPCA, known as Napa Humane, is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1973. Recognizing that companion animals are an important part of healthy communities, we've grown to consider Napa Humane a community service organization. Our programs and services are designed to address the needs of animals – and also to provide support, education, and assistance for all the people who care for and about them.

Napa Humane is a private and independent organization that is supported by private donations by individuals and businesses, bequests, and fees for service. We receive no government funding, tax dollars or funding from national animal welfare organizations.

Our Mission

To promote the welfare of companion animals through protection, advocacy, education, and by example.