

Helping Your Dog Overcome the Fear of Startling Noises

Overview



It's fairly common for dogs to be frightened of thunder, firecrackers or other loud sounds even if the dog has had no traumatic experiences associated with the sound. Chances are the fearful behaviour will get worse if it's left untreated.

When your dog becomes frightened, s/he tries to reduce the fear. S/he may try to escape to a place (room/area in the house) where the scary sounds are less intense or attempt to leave the yard altogether. If this results in the dog feeling less afraid, then the escape or destructive behaviour is reinforced since it's successfully lessened their fear. For some dogs, just the activity or physical exertion associated such behaviours may release their anxiety. Unfortunately, escape and/or destructive behaviour can be a problem for you and may result in physical injury to your dog.

Things that are present in the environment whenever your dog hears the startling noise can become associated with that noise. For example, dogs that 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 that are afraid of firecrackers may become afraid of people who have the firecrackers. Or, they may become afraid to go in the yard, if that's where they typically hear the firecrackers.

What Can You Do to Help Your Dog?

1. Create A Safe Place.

Create a *safe place* for your dog to go to when s/he hears the noises that frighten her. This must be a safe location from his/her perspective, not yours. Notice where s/he goes, or tries to go, when she's frightened, and if at all possible, give her access to that place. If s/he's trying to get inside the house, consider installing a dog door. If s/he is attempting to crawl under a bed, allow access to the bedroom. You can also create a hide-away that's dark, small and shielded from the frightening sound as much as possible. Playing a fan or radio may assist in masking the frightening noise.

Encourage your dog to go to the safe place when you're home and the frightening noise occurs. Feed him/her in that location and associate other happy things occurring there. S/he must be able to come and go from this location freely as confinement in that place will only cause more problems if s/he doesn't want to be there.

The safe place approach may work with some dogs, but not all. Some dogs are instead inclined to move and be active when frightened.



2. Distraction.

Distracting your dog works best when s/he is just beginning to feel anxious. Encourage engagement in any activity that captures her/his attention and distracts her/him from behaving fearfully.

When your dog first becomes aware of the noise (and is not yet showing a lot of fearful behaviour), immediately try to interest her/him in doing something s/he loves. This could involve playing (in an escape-proof area) or practicing commands. Reward your dog with praise and treats for paying attention to the game/s and/or commands. As the storm or noise builds, you may not be able to hold her/his attention. Still, it may delay the start of the fearful behaviour for a longer period each time that you do it. Stop the process if you can't keep your dog's attention and s/he begins acting afraid. Otherwise, you may inadvertently reinforce the fearful behaviour.



3. Behaviour Modification.

You may need professional assistance to create and implement behaviour modification. Counter-conditioning and de-sensitisation are behaviour modification techniques which can successfully reduce phobias and fears. You condition or teach your dog to respond in non-fearful ways to sounds/stimuli that previously frightened her/him. This must be done very gradually.

Start by exposing your dog to an intensity level of noise that doesn't frighten her/him and pair it with something pleasant (treat, tummy rubs or a fun game). Gradually increase the volume as you continue to offer something pleasant. Through this process, your dog will come to associate good things with the previously feared sound.

For example, play a CD of fireworks at such a low volume that your dog doesn't respond fearfully. While it's playing, provide your dog with dinner, a treat or play a loved game. Next time, play the CD a little louder while offering the positive re-enforcement. Continue increasing the volume every session over a period of several weeks or months. If s/he displays fearful behaviour at any point stop immediately. Begin your next session at a lower volume (which doesn't produce anxiety) and proceed more slowly.

NOTE: If these techniques aren't applied correctly, they will not work and may make the problem even more pronounced. With some fears it's difficult to re-create the noise. For example, thunder is accompanied by changes in barometric pressure, lightening and rain. So your dog's fearful response may be to the combination of these things and not just the thunder.

4. Consult Your Vet.

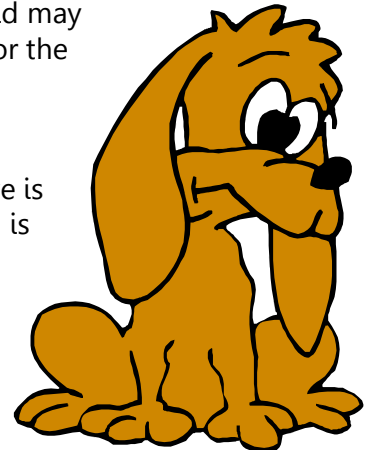


Medication may make your dog less anxious for short periods of time. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe medication for your dog. Do not give your dog any over-the-counter or prescription medication without first consulting your veterinarian (animals don't respond to drugs as humans do). Drug therapy, alone, won't reduce fears and phobias permanently. However, in severe cases, a combination of behaviour modification and medication may be the best option.

What You Should Not Do

These approaches don't work because they don't decrease your dog's fear.

1. Attempts to reassure your dog (pet, soothe, treats) when s/he is afraid may reinforce the fearful behaviour. S/he may interpret this as a reward for the fearful behaviour. Rather behave normally as if you don't notice the fearfulness.
2. Putting your dog in a crate to prevent her/him from being destructive is not recommended. Your dog will still be afraid while in the crate and is likely to injure her/himself while attempting to get out.
3. Don't punish your dog for being afraid as that will only make her/him more fearful.
4. Don't try to force your dog to experience or be close to the sound that frightens her/him. S/he may become aggressive in an attempt to escape from the situation.
5. Obedience classes won't make your dog less afraid of thunder or other noises, but could help boost their general confidence.



Seek Professional Help

If your dog has severe fears and phobias and you're unable to achieve success with the techniques outlined here, please consult an animal behaviour specialist along with your veterinarian.