



The sound of fear: Noise phobias torment dogs

Up to 20 percent of pooches are sensitive enough to need professional help

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For years we've taken our dogs to our friend Gregg's house for an Independence Day celebration that stretches late into the night. His hilltop home offers a view of fireworks displays from the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif., all the way to Long Beach. But these days we leave before the fireworks begin. The rockets' red glare and bombs bursting in air send our dog Twyla into a frenzy of fearful shaking.

Fortunately, Twyla's fear of fireworks is relatively mild. Dogs with noise phobias triggered by fireworks, storms and sounds can go into full-blown panic mode, jumping through windows and glass doors, digging through carpet at doorways or digging out of the yard and running away. Every year, shelters take in large numbers of pets spooked by Fourth of July fireworks.

Up to 20 percent of dogs of all ages and breeds suffer from noise phobias so severe that their people seek professional help for them, writes veterinary behaviorist Bonnie Beaver in her book "Canine Behavior: A Guide for Veterinarians." (Cats can also develop fears of certain noises, but they usually just run and hide rather than engaging in destructive behavior.) Thunder and fireworks are the most common causes of noise phobias, but dogs can develop a fear of any sound: the rustling of a garbage bag, the beep of a microwave oven or the whir of a ceiling fan.

"I actually had a client whose dog was afraid of the sound of the toilet paper roll," says veterinary behaviorist Terry Curtis of the University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine in Gainesville, Fla.

Crossed signals

Fears of loud or unexpected noises are triggered by what's called the orienting response, the brain's mechanism for being aware. When we or our dogs hear certain sounds, the brain instantly processes them to determine whether they might signal danger.

"We have to be able to process sensory input to stay alive and function in our world," says veterinary neurologist Susan Wagner, who teaches at Ohio State University Veterinary College and is the co-author of "Through a Dog's Ear: Using Sound to Improve the Health & Behavior of Your Canine Companion." Wagner says that sensitivity to sound is instinctive to all dogs, but dogs that tend to be anxious are more likely to develop noise phobias.

Sometimes fear of certain sounds can be linked to a specific event: a particularly bad storm, a smoke detector going off or a fireworks display. In other dogs, the fear progresses over time, so a dog who's afraid of storms gets worse each storm season.

Thunderstorm phobia is a complex fear encompassing sound, changes in barometric pressure, ionization and light, and the presence of wind and rain — making it one of the most difficult noise phobias to manage. With thunderstorm season in full swing throughout the South and Midwest and Independence Day rapidly approaching, dog owners seeking answers to their pets' fears can try a number of ways to desensitize and counter-condition dogs to sounds that frighten them: sound and music CDs, pheromones, aromatherapy and, in severe cases, medication.

Music to soothe the savage beast

Exposing a dog to the noise of rain, thunder or fireworks through sound CDs and gradually increasing the volume and duration of the sounds can go a long way in reducing the dog's overall level of fear, Curtis says. Medication can also help the dog remain calm during the storm, usually a temporary remedy that can be withdrawn once the dog's fear is more manageable.

Curtis says her patients have also responded well to Dog Appeasing Pheromone products, designed to emit comforting and familiar scents to canines, and the [Storm Defender Cape](#), a close-fitting wrap with a metallic

lining that reduces a dog's sensitivity to the static charge buildup that occurs before a thunderstorm.

Wagner has studied the calming effects of music on dogs with noise phobias. In one study, she and her partner, psychoacoustic expert Joshua Leeds of San Francisco, found that when classical music was simplified to have less instrumentation and tones were lowered and the tempo was dropped, dogs relaxed.

"All of that was done to get the brain waves and heart rate to drop," Wagner says. "Dogs that listened to it became substantially calmer and even fell asleep."

Music appears to affect behavior because sound is made of waves. When sound waves travel through the hearing nerve to the cerebral cortex, they influence brain waves.

"When brain waves, heart rate and breathing slow, we become calmer, and I believe that's what's happening with the dogs as well when they listen to the psychoacoustically produced calming music."

Stopping a phobia before it starts

So is it possible to prevent noise phobias from developing in the first place? Early exposure before 14 weeks of age to loud or unexpected sounds can help inoculate a puppy against noise fears, says veterinary behaviorist Lore I. Haug, who practices in Sugar Land, Texas. So can teaching a dog early on that storms are fun.

"I have clients throw 'storm parties' so the dog learns that really special things happen when there's a storm," Curtis says. "A special toy comes out, a really yummy treat appears, the Storm Defender Cape is put on. This uses the technique of classical conditioning so the dog learns, ideally at a very young age, that storms mean something great."

Kim Campbell Thornton is an award-winning author who has written many articles and more than a dozen books about dogs and cats. She belongs to the Dog Writers Association of America and is past president of the Cat Writers Association. She shares her home in California with three Cavalier King Charles spaniels and one African ringneck parakeet.

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