

Thunder phobia in dogs

If you have a dog who frantically tries to find someplace to hide after that first clap of thunder, then you have a dog with “thunder phobia.” Thunder phobic dogs experience extreme anxiety during a thunderstorm. They may pant, whine, salivate, pace, tremble, and run and hide. Not only is it very stressful for the dog, but very stressful for the owner who feels helpless because typically there’s no way to console the dog. Many cases are so severe that it appears as though the dog has completely “zoned out.” Some dogs begin to become anxious as soon as it starts to rain, or if the wind picks up. It’s truly heartbreaking to watch, so how can you help?

Systematic Desensitization and Classical Counterconditioning

First, make sure there are no underlying medical conditions by bringing your dog to your veterinarian. Medical problems can trigger or worsen your dog’s fear. Next, systematic desensitization and counterconditioning (DSCC) treatment can begin. Your veterinarian may prescribe medication to help enhance the treatment sessions in severe cases of thunder phobia. A ThunderShirt® can also be purchased from most pet stores and may help alleviate some of the anxiety your dog is experiencing. If your dog does need medication, then chances are he has a severe case of thunder phobia. Severe cases are best handled by a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB), a board certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB), or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT).

DSCC treatment should be conducted about 20 minutes daily, for several weeks to several months depending on the level of your dog’s anxiety. It involves gradually exposing your dog to the feared sound, while pairing the sound with good events (super special treats, a stuffed Kong®, or play with a ball, squeaky toy, or frisbee). If any signs of fear appear, then you’re going too fast. It will be necessary to return to an earlier step where your dog appeared relaxed.

To determine if the recording is a good simulation for real thunder, turn up the volume to the point where you see a small amount of fear from your dog. If you observe this, you can then begin treatment sessions, just not at that very moment. Give your dog time to recover. You’ll know you’re starting the session at the right volume if your dog becomes slightly alert upon hearing the sounds, but doesn’t become frightened. If you continue to crank up the volume and your dog doesn’t respond at all, he may be responding to other changes in weather that occur just before a storm (e.g. overcast skies, wind). In this case, the recordings won’t work and it will be necessary to consult a behaviorist.

Step by Step Instructions

1. Sit with your dog anyplace he retreats to during a real storm.
2. Use high quality, varied recordings of thunder.
3. Present them at a low volume.
4. After each sound make light of it by saying “oh that was nothing,” in an upbeat tone of voice, then give your dog the treat or play with him.
5. Gradually raise the volume until the sounds are at their highest level. How quickly you’ll be able to increase the volume will depend on your dog’s reaction. It could be 5 minutes, or 5 days. *Do not rush.*

6. After multiple sessions move to different locations of your home.
7. Play the recordings at a low volume again. You'll no doubt be able to proceed faster this time than during the initial sessions.

If a real storm should take place during this process, try conducting a treatment session. Turn up the volume of the recording. The hope is your dog will think the real thunder just a different type of recorded sound. If you don't have a recording handy, pretend it's a session and engage in the same activities. Whenever possible, begin before the first clap of thunder to prevent his anxiety from escalating to a full blown phobic response. Once your dog overcomes his fear, conduct a couple of treatment sessions a month to ensure that his thunder phobia does not return.

Barbara Pezzanite, Ph.D., CPDT-KA
Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist