



BEHAVIOR
SERIES

Helping Your Dog Overcome Fear of Thunder and Other Startling Noises

WHILE A GOOD “KRAACK” OR “BOOM” may have been good while Batman was taking down the Joker, such startling sounds are no joke for your dog. Firecrackers, thunder, and other loud, unexpected sounds often leave dogs frightened and wanting to flee to a safer place. These types of fears may develop even though your dog has had no traumatic experiences associated with the sound. The good news is that many fear-related problems can be successfully resolved. If left untreated, however, your dog’s fearful behavior will probably get worse.

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 or destructive behavior can be a problem for you and could also result in physical injury to your dog.

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 to Help

Create a Safe Place

Try to 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, and if at all 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.

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