

# UNDERSTANDING THE DOG WITH FEAR OF LOUD NOISES

It is relatively common for a dog to have a fear of loud noises, such as fireworks, thunderstorms and loud vehicles. Although common, this fear is often a source of great distress for you and your dog. Trying to escape from the noise, a dog's normal instinctive behavior is to seek shelter or retreat to avoid danger. However, things can go wrong when your dog overreacts to sounds that don't represent true danger. Regardless of the reason for your dog being afraid of loud noises, there are ways you can help your dog overcome it. With time, training and patience your dog will eventually learn to be ok with loud noises.

## WHY IS SHE AFRAID?

Dogs have very sensitive hearing and can hear much higher frequencies than we can. They can also sense environmental changes in barometric pressure, as well as electrostatic fluctuations. Sometimes the fear comes from generalized anxiety, separation anxiety, fear of new situations or lack of confidence. Sometimes the problem can be from poor socialization and a lack of exposure to new situations and noises before 16 weeks of age.

## IS SHE AFRAID?

It is important to learn to read your dog's body language so you can recognize her fear signals. See our Canine Body Language [Tip Sheet](#) and Companion [video](#) to learn how to read your dog's body language. Here are some examples of behaviors and body language that indicate your dog is afraid:

- Withdraws to a place she considers safe
- Uncontrollable shaking/trembling
- Drooling
- Excessive Gas
- Dilated Pupils
- Whining
- Panting
- Hyperventilating
- Pacing/Running around in a panic
- Ears flat and pulled back
- Destructive chewing/digging
- Defecating/Urinating indoors
- Constantly following you/Not wanting to leave your side

## WHAT CAN I DO?

- Create a Safe Place: Creating a safe place for your dog to freely go to when she is afraid can help to reduce anxiety. This space should be an area where your dog feels safe – not necessarily what you perceive as safe.
  - Start with a place that your dog already uses frequently to rest and/or relax during normal times.



- Set up this area with things your dog finds comforting, such as: her bed, an article of clothing that smells like you, her favorite toys, etc.
- Other items that can help with anxiety that you can place in this area are a fan, radio or white noise machine to help block out some of the noise, a DAP diffuser and soft-glow nightlight.
- Encourage her to go this space when there are not any anxiety-inducing noises going on to help her understand that “good things” happen to her while she spends time there. You can feed her in this space, give her high value treats, sit with her and pet/brush her, etc.
- Distractions: Distracting your dog *before* she begins to get anxious can be effective in reducing her anxiety. Try to get her interested in activity that you know she really enjoys – fetch, hide-n-seek, chewing on a KONG, etc. Use lots of treats and praise during this activity to reward her for engagement.
  - If the noise becomes too much for her and she is unable to continue to concentrate on whatever activity you choose – stop the activity.
- Behavior Modification: You can use a combination of counter-conditioning and desensitization to help reduce her anxiety. Using these techniques teaches your dog to react in a non-fearful way to sounds and other stimuli that frighten her.
  - Both counter-conditioning and desensitization need to be done gradually, during times when you can control the “trigger” (or thing that frightens her). Meaning, do not attempt these activities during the peak of a thunderstorm, or on July 4th while the fireworks are going off.
  - Begin by exposing her the “trigger” at a level where she does not show any fear or anxiety, and pair that noise with a high value treat.
  - Example – Fear of Thunderstorms:
    - Play a recording of a thunderstorm at a very low level where your dog does not display any anxiety or fearful behaviors.
    - While the recording is playing, feed your dog tiny bits of very high value treats (i.e. chicken, cheese, hot dogs, lunch meat, etc.)
    - As soon as you stop playing the recording, stop feeding her treats
    - Gradually increase the volume of the recording over several sessions (which may take weeks or months)
    - If at any time during the training, your dog displays anxiety or fear behaviors from the noise, stop immediately. Begin your next session at a lower volume where your dog is comfortable and start again.
- Calming Products: There are several over-the-counter calming products that may help with your dog’s noise phobia. Like with medication, these products are designed to be used in conjunction with training and/or behavior modification.
  - DAP: DAP (Dog Appeasing Pheromone) can help decrease anxiety of any type in dogs. DAP is available in collars, spray and diffuser plug-ins.
  - Calming Cap: A sheer mesh cap that covers your dog’s eyes. By reducing the amount of light your dog sees, it can help reduce anxiety since it is limiting visual stimuli. *The Calming Cap should not be used without proper introduction and positive reinforcement training.*
  - ThunderShirt: An almost-full body wrap that works by applying constant, gentle pressure (much like swaddling an infant).
  - Essential Oils (Sprays/Drops): Essential oils such as Chamomile, lavender and Egyptian geranium have shown to be effective with helping to reduce anxiety in some dogs. *Essential oils should not be given to your dog directly, but rather applied to an article that will be near or on your dog, such as: collars, bandanas, a ThunderShirt, dog beds, etc.*



- Do not be afraid to comfort your dog during periods of fear or anxiety if your dog seeks it out. You can try petting, brushing, talking or singing softly/quietly or reading out loud to your dog during this time.
  - Although comforting your dog can sometimes provide your dog with some relief in the moment, it will not change her behavior long-term. To change the behavior itself, you will need to use counter-conditioning and desensitization protocols (see above).
- Consult a Veterinarian: There are several medications that can be prescribed by your veterinarian that can help dogs with noise phobias. Keep in mind that medications do not work on their own and must be combined with training and/or a behavior modification program for them to be most effective.

## WHAT NOT TO DO

- Do not punish or yell at your dog for being afraid, as this will make her fear worse.
- Do not put your dog in a crate or other confined space to prevent her from being destructive or escaping. Unless your dog already uses her crate as a place to relax or chooses to self-confine (i.e. goes under the bed, hides in a closet, goes to her safe space), this will cause her fear and/or anxiety to increase and she may hurt herself or others.
- Do not force your dog to hear noises that cause her anxiety or fear without a proper counter-conditioning and desensitization program (see above).
- If your dog is hiding, do not pull or force her out of this space - unless the space is dangerous for her and/or other members of the household.
- Keep in mind that if you are feeling mad, upset, frustrated or anxious about the situation at hand, your dog's emotional state may be affected (and she may "mirror" what you are feeling). If you have these feelings, try to resolve your feelings prior to interacting with your dog.

