

Problem Solving

Noise Sensitivities or Phobias in Dogs

What is it?

It is very common for dogs to be sensitive to loud noises and relatively common for them to develop a fear and in some cases or phobia response to certain sounds e.g. fireworks or thunderstorms.

A dog that is sensitive to noise may just shake a little and try to stay close to you while experiencing fear, while other dogs may experience a truly phobic reaction and become destructive in their environment and try to escape. In either situation it is important to find the trigger for your dog's fear and work towards reducing the stress and anxiety your dog is suffering with.

Noise sensitivities can generalise readily to other similar sounds. For example, a dog who's developed a fear of thunder may generalise to fearing rain, wind, darkening skies and flashes of lightning.

Common noise related triggers include:

- Thunderstorms
- Fireworks
- Fire trucks / Motorcycles / Airplanes (unusually loud engine noise)
- Vacuum Cleaners (or other loud household appliances e.g. lawn mowers)
- Sudden unexpected loud noises – popping balloon, car backfire, etc.

What can be done about it?

Stage 1. Identify the triggers...

Reducing your dog's fear and stress with a behaviour modification plan will involve first determining what your dog is afraid of.

As your dog may experience fear from any number of noisy situations, identifying these requires you to pay attention to how your dog reacts to the triggers. Signs of stress and anxiety will differ from dog to dog but some common fearful behaviours your dog may display in response to a noise stimulus include:

- Hiding under furniture or in other dark secluded areas
- Shaking or trembling
- Avoidance behaviours (running away / escaping)
- Defensive aggression (growling, barking, lunging)
- Fearful body postures –curling up into a ball and making themselves small, ears flattened, head and body held low
- Destructive behaviours (often a result of escape attempts)
- Vocalization (barking, whining, screaming)
- Uncontrolled urination or defecation
- Drooling and or panting
- Pacing or unwillingness to lie down or stay in one place
- Shedding or dandruff
- Sweating through the paws

Very intense fear behaviours will be more complicated to modify and you should seek qualified professional help from a behaviourist if your dog's fearful response is severe or if, after a period of training, your dog's condition has not improved.

Stage 2. Make a plan...

When you know what triggers your dog's fear-related behaviours, you can begin to work on reducing the fear response by making a plan to manage your environment and limit your dog's exposure to the triggers. If you can anticipate the onset of anxiety, distracting or redirecting your dog to focus on something else can help resolve minor fear responses.

For example, if your dog is nervous around fireworks you can knowingly anticipate that the Guy Fawkes and New Years will be target days for anxiety and fear in your dog. For those times consider putting the following in your action plan.

[First off, consult a veterinarian](#) to make sure the behaviour problem your dog is experiencing is not related to a medical condition. A veterinarian can also look at whether prescribing some medication may help your dog cope while you work through a treatment plan or for certain times of the year e.g. for fireworks.

Plan an active day for your dog with plenty of exercise and one on one time. This will help to create a tired dog who is more likely to relax sleep in the evening.

Create a safe place for your dog with a soft bed and favourite toys. If your dog uses a crate, put it somewhere away from the external walls of the house or windows (you can also cover the crate and shut the curtains as well). Alternatively your dog may already have chosen a location they prefer e.g. a hallway closet or under a bed.

Massaging your dog or using Tellington Touch (TTouch) techniques will reassure and help to calm some dogs.

Try herbal calming remedies to take the edge off and help your dog to relax. For example the essential oil of lavender may reduce a dog's stress response. It's suggested placing a few drops on your dog's collar or bedding before a trigger is known to occur,

Dog Appeasing Pheromone (DAP) plug ins are another option that may help to reduce stress in your dog's environment but there are no guarantees.

Distract your dog with a favourite game they enjoy during the actual event. This can take their mind off the scary noises and associate something good with the event.

Food distractions (treats) may also be helpful if your dog will take food. A Kong stuffed with their favourite food will keep some occupied on something they enjoy. So plan ahead of time and have a couple already stuffed in the freezer.

Do not be afraid to soothe your dog with kind words and petting. Fear is an emotion and not a behaviour. It cannot be reinforced. Some people falsely believe that soothing can make a dog more fearful. Think about if you're in a plane and are afraid of flying. Someone telling you softly that it's going to be okay and holding your hand is not going to make you more fearful but might just calm you a little and it's nice to know you have their support. It's the same for dogs.

Body wraps are available for those dogs that respond well to pressure applied to their body. Some examples are Thundershirt (Thundershirt.com), Anxiety Wrap (Anxietywrap.com) and Storm Defender (Stormdefender.com). Many pet owners and veterinarians find these extremely helpful but results vary as it's dependant on what the dog finds comforting.

Helping your dog through a mild fear episode will be more successful if you plan ahead.

For dogs with a more phobic response, the assistance of a behaviourist and/or your veterinarian, may be required to provide pharmacological support (medication).

Phobias are defined as a fear response that is persistent, maladaptive, and out of proportion to the situation. They are often identified with destructive and/or escape behaviours e.g. your dog trying to escape the thing that is causing the fear.

Stage 3. Reduce anxiety and rebuild confidence

The goal with the behaviour modification plan is to change the way your dog feels about the things they are most afraid of. Your goal is to have your dog experience a pleasant outcome whenever they encounter the scary trigger.

It is critical to proceed with any exercises at a gradual pace to allow plenty of time for your dog or puppy to adjust. Never force your dog into an interaction with something that scares them. Always start from their current level of tolerance and if you see a stress or fearful response from your dog, then you have gone too far ahead and need to go back a step or two until your dog is more comfortable. As an example, below is an exercise to help reduce anxiety associated with thunderstorms.

You can apply the same principles to other fear-inducing noise triggers your dog has.

1. **Purchase or make your own recording** of a thunderstorm.
2. At first **play the recording at a very low volume** so you don't elicit a fear response from your dog. While it is playing, engage your dog in their favourite game and feed them special treats. This starts to form a positive association with the background noise (the recording).
3. In further sessions **gradually increase the volume** of the recording while providing the positive interactions.
4. **If you notice any fearful response** you have gone beyond your dog's threshold of tolerance. **Stop and take a break,** reduce the volume and continue at a slower pace.
5. **Gradually increase** the volume **over a period of weeks or months.**

This type of training will require short, frequent training sessions (these could be during meal times). Your dog's fear will not subside over night. Changing an emotional response to something scary will take time and patience.

It may be difficult to recreate all the components of the situation (e.g. lightening, wind, changes in barometric pressure and darkness) that may be precursors to your dog's fear episodes, but trying to duplicate the triggers at significantly lower exposure levels will allow your dog to associate good things (playing with you and getting treats) with the onset of the scary thing (thunderstorm).

Top Tips

Never punish your dog or puppy for having a fearful response. Using punishment will only cause your dog to be more frightened or anxious and can complicate the training process.

Punishment will not help your dog to overcome their fears and accept a frightening situation as non-threatening. Using a desensitising process will gradually help your dog be less frightened and more confident in their environment.

Helping your dog work through their fear-related issues will take time. There is no “quick fix.” Patience will be an important factor in the success of your dog’s adjustment and acclimation.

Make sure you ID your dog! Some dogs take off outside of their property or away from you on a walk or at the park when they are spooked by a sound that scares them. By micro-chipping (and registering the microchip) as well as having contact information on their dog tag or collar you are increasing the chances of someone contacting you if your dog goes missing. Dogs go missing every year when they run off in a panic.

Courtesy of your instructors at
Central Allbreeds Dog Training School

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