

# NEWSLETTER



## Storm Anxiety

Spring brings with it showers and thunderstorms that may cause our dogs to experience anxious behavior including such mild behavior as hiding, or panting. Fear often can intensify with recurring exposure to storms until the pet becomes destructive to itself and its environment.

Signs of distress may include: panting, salivating, pacing, chewing, and indoor elimination. Dogs may paw at doorways or actually chew walls and furniture. It can

sometimes take hours for these distressed pets to settle down. Owners often find themselves adjusting their plans if there are storms predicted. This is a real problem for dogs left home alone during the day.

A high incidence dogs have multiple phobias. A study by Dr. Karen Overall determined that many dogs with storm phobia also suffer from noise phobia and separation anxiety. These dogs may have more intense symptoms.

### Quick Facts:

*Dogs may not only respond to thunder, but also to changes in barometric pressure, wind or rain showers.*

*90% of dogs with storm phobias also have other forms of anxiety including noise phobia. Almost 50% have been adopted from shelters.*

*Dogs experience intense fear including trembling, panting and crying. Dogs may injure themselves by breaking through windows or screens. They bite and claw at carpets, door and window frames.*

*Treatment includes desensitization, counter-conditioning and medication.*

*Most dogs can show improvement with a combination of medication and behavior modification.*



The severity of symptoms frequently requires medical intervention as well as behavioral modification. The most common medications are from a class of drugs called benzodiazepines. The advantage of these medications is that they have a quick onset of action and they reduce anxiety. They may cause mild to moderate sedation and stumbling. With prolonged usage this group can cause dependency and decreased effectiveness.

Additionally, some dogs with multiple anxiety disorders need daily medication including tricyclic antidepressants or an SSRI to decrease their overall stress level as well as an anti-panic medication for storms.

Dog Appeasing Pheromone (DAP) is a commercial product that mimics the mammary appeasing pheromone. Some studies indicate the DAP diffuser placed in a dog's environment can decrease the anxiety dogs

experience when challenged with noise phobia and separation anxiety.

#### **Behavior modification**

Though owners might mean to comfort a dog who is fearful, this is an inappropriate response in the anxious dog during a storm. The dog senses a reward for its fearful behavior. Nor do you want to punish your dog as this will potentiate fearful response to the storm. Behavior modification takes time and in many cases, requires that dogs are also medicated concurrently.

**Desensitization** is exposure to a noxious stimulus. Initially the stimulus (noise, thunder) is at a low intensity. Once the dog is comfortable in the environment with the stimulus, it is increased gradually. Desensitization alone rarely works. Usually it is combined with counter-conditioning.

**Counter-conditioning** involves eliciting a behavioral response that is incompatible with the phobia. For example, playing or feeding the dog while it is exposed to a low level of noxious stimulus. As the dog associates the noise/thunder with a positive reward, the stimulus (noise) is increased.



It is best to begin training during winter months when the threat of storms is at a minimum. Training must be done several times daily. Dogs must learn that rewards only are given for calm, relaxed behavior.

**Other strategies** include insulating the environment from noise, using background noises to reduce the noise, and moving the pet to a boarding facility or veterinary hospital to distract it from the fear.

Few pets are 'cured' of their storm phobia. However, studies indicate that with medical intervention and behavioral modification, most can be improved.



## COUNTER-CONDITIONING PLAN

1. Do not reinforce attention seeking behavior or anxiety at any time (attention seeking behavior includes: pawing for attention, nudging with head, whining, barking).
2. Behavior modification takes time and repetition. It is best to begin during a time of the year when storms are at a minimum.
3. Continue with basic training at all times. This includes daily repetitions of come, sit, stay, and 'go to your place' when there are no distractions. Use a head halter that is properly fitted to aid in compliance. *Training your dog to settle or relax in its own comfort area without fearful stimuli should be the first goal.*
4. Dogs should *only* be rewarded ( treats, attention ) when relaxed and settled. This is the way your dog will learn that calm behavior is expected.
5. Once dogs are trained to be calm without noxious stimulus, owners can use background noise CD's to continue training. This is called 'pairing' between sound and treats. Using a thunderstorm CD, while performing basic training, or while playing with a favorite toy ( a game of fetch, for example).
6. You may begin by playing a favorite game before the CD is on. Start with the noise level very low volume, Continue to train or play while gradually increasing the volume. Each time you see his attention move to the source of the sound have him sit. stay and reward him.
7. The goal is to have him sit and relax while the CD is playing loudly.
8. *It is important not to induce fearful behavior with the stimulus or to reward fearful behavior.*
9. The best outcomes occur when these training sessions are repeated several times daily in all types of weather conditions and are consistent with all family members.

**Resources:**

Sounds of nature: rainstorms, New Age Music, Hollywood, Calif.  
Sounds of nature: thunderstorms and rain, New Age Music, Hollywood, Calif.  
Electrifying thunderstorms, SPJ Music, Hauppauge, NY  
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