Thunderstorms: Help Your Pet Conquer Fear

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solutions to

storm phobia

Along with warmer temperatures and longer days, spring and summer bring an increased chance for severe weather. And for many pet owners, severe weather (and thunderstorms in general) means an anxious pet.

Fear of bad weather, oftentimes of thunder in particular, can soon become a phobia, a condition defined as a persistent, excessive, and irrational fear response. In addition to storm-related noise, pets may fear storm-associated events such as a change in barometric pressure, lightning, electrostatic disturbances, and even smells.

While some research has shown certain dog breeds (Collies, German Shepherds, Beagles, and Basset Hounds) to be predisposed to developing noise phobias, additional research must be performed. Experts have yet to determine the exact cause for dogs' storm phobia.

Storm-phobic pets frequently become more afraid with each individual storm. Unfortunately, pets may also become fearful of similar or associated sounds. For example, dogs that fear thunder may also fear large, thundering vehicles or even the sound of rain.

If your pet lives in fear of storms, first talk to your veterinarian. He or she can offer advice on calming your pet or training suggestions to minimize noise sensitivity. Once you've consulted your veterinarian, you can take

Signs your pet is afraid of storms

Even before a storm hits, your pet may begin exhibiting easy-to-recognize signs of stress. Watch for these undesirable behaviors:

- Hiding
- Urinating, defecating, or expressing the anal glands
- Chewing
- Panting
- Pacing
- Trying to escape
- Drooling
- Frantically searching for you or excessively clinging to you
- Unwillingness to eat/lack of interest in food

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several steps to help your pet feel more comfortable and even overcome his fear.

Be kind, but don't overly comfort or cuddle

Resist the urge to overly cuddle or give treats simply because your pet gets upset during storms. Otherwise, he may learn to associate frightened behavior with rewarding attention. Similarly, if you attempt to constantly comfort your pet, he may interpret your attention as confirmation that there really is something to be afraid of. Your cuddling, petting, treating, and comforting actually offers positive reinforcement of undesirable behavior(s). Instead project conficence and give your dog attention through activities he enjoys such as playing or grooming.

interest in food
- Ignoring your commands
- Trembling or shaking
- Dilated pupils
- Excessive barking or meowing

If your pet does any of the above before or during a storm, you likely have a storm- and/or noise-phobic pet who requires your assistance. Talk to your veterinarian to learn more and formulate a stress-relieving game plan.

Exude calmness

Your attitude about storms can influence the severity of your pet's fear. If you are nervous before and during storms, your pet will sense it and become (more) nervous and fearful himself. Your pet looks to your for direction, so project an "upbeat" and "in-charge" attitude. Otherwise, every storm could become increasingly traumatic. Consider purchasing a weather radio to add to your peace of mind and help you be ready for storms, keeping you and your pet calmer.

Create and/or encourage access to a safe space

Never confine your nervous pet to a cage or a small room; this could cause him additional stress and even injury. Instead, accommodate his needs. If, for example, he dives under your bed, keep the bedroom door open. Or give him a cozy nesting bed that "protects" on one or more sides, such as the Double-Deep Slumber Nest, or Chaise Lounge. You might also consider "changing the scenery" by pulling drapes, blinds, or curtains, or by taking your pet to a room where he might hear less of the storm (such as a basement room).

Distract your pet

Try filling the environment with "white noise." The constant sound of a fan or air conditioner can help block out scary noises. Playing a TV or radio can have a similar effect (while simultaneously providing you with storm-related information).

You might also try making storm time playtime. Dump out your pet's toy box and

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have fun! Or, reserve one special toy for use only in times of bad weather. With your consistent repetition, your pet will learn to associate a negative stimulus with a positive event. Similarly, if your pet is particularly motivated by food, offer a special storm-only treat or enhance storm time play with treats formulated to support calm behavior. Your pet will soon expect, enjoy, and ultimately be distracted by a fun toy or delicious treat every time the weather turns bad.

Never punish storm-related behavior

Your pet's undesirable behavior before and during storms is a normal reaction to his fear, and this reaction doesn't deserve punishment. Punishing your pet for "naughty" storm-related behavior will only increase his anxiety level. Rather than punish, you should change your pet's environment, modify his behavior, and offer medications if advised by your veterinarian.

Be wise, exercise

On days when storms are predicted, exercise your pet even more than you normally do. The exercise will help tire your pet, both mentally and physically, and he may be less responsive to the weather's frightening stimuli. Exercise also raises natural serotonin levels, which can act as a sedative.

Try desensitizing your pet

Desensitization is the practice of gradually eliminating your pet's negative reaction to frightening circumstances or events. Talk to your veterinarian about using desensitization to ultimately teach your pet to be calm during storms. Your veterinarian will likely suggest obtaining a commercially produced CD of storm sounds, as well as a small strobe light if lightning also frightens your pet and the CD alone proves to be ineffective. First, play the CD at normal volume and gauge your pet's reaction. If your pet reacts negatively, turn the CD down to a low volume your pet can still hear but is not afraid of. While the recording is playing at the low level, engage your pet in an activity during which you give the commands, such as obedience training or performing tricks. Give food or other rewards during the activity when your pet accomplishes the assigned task. If your pet shows signs of fear, stop and try again the next day, playing the CD at an even lower level. Never reward your pet while he is fearful or anxious.

Schedule daily desensitization sessions that last about 20 minutes. Each day, gradually increase the CD volume and involve your pet in an activity with rewards. Eventually, your pet should show no fear when the recording is played loudly. Next, try playing the recording for a short time while you are absent; gradually increasing the length of your absence while the recording is playing. When your pet appears to have completely lost his fear, you can reduce the sessions to one per week. You'll likely need to repeat desensitization sessions weekly for the life of your pet. During an actual storm, use the same activities and

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rewards you used during the training sessions. Be sure to talk to your veterinarian for additional advice on desensitization.

Give appropriate medications

Your veterinarian may prescribe a medication to help minimize storm-related anxiety and fear. A variety of easy-to-give prescription medications, including Clomipramine, Buspirone HCl, Fluoxetine, and Alprazolam can help your dog feel much calmer.

Non-prescription solutions, including the use of pheromones, can help calm your dog. Diffusers and sprays that mimic natural, calming pheromones may be particularly effective. Herbal drops can also help calm pets. These solutions can help pets feel comfortable and reassured, as well as less likely to be destructive.

You love your pet and you want to ensure his comfort, safety, and security in his home. While there is no guarantee that a noise phobia or storm phobia can be totally resolved, in many instances you can effectively manage your pet's fear. Treatment effectiveness depends on a number of factors, including the severity of the phobia; how long the pet has had it; whether it is ongoing, seasonal, or unpredictable; and the amount of time you are willing to commit to the behavior modification techniques. As always, involve your veterinarian and don't be afraid to ask questions about the requirements of alleviating your pet's fear.

Above all, remember that your pet often looks to you for guidance. Show your pet that storms are not to be feared.

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