

How to calm a pet dog spooked by loud noises

A booming thunderstorm peeling across the horizon. The sudden pops and startling blasts of Roman candles, bottle rockets and M-80s on a warm evening in early July. The irritating rat-a-tat of a jackhammer piling its way through the pavement.

While we are conditioned to accept or shrug off these noises as ordinary, everyday clamor, many dogs react to these strange and frightening sounds with whimpers, trembling or worse.

Because dogs have such an acute sense of hearing, it's natural for some dogs to respond fearfully to such stimuli, say the experts.

"This is extremely common, because your pet usually sits at home in a nice, quiet house most of the time," said Babette Gladstein, VMD, New York, N.Y. "The response is common in pets with separation anxiety. Sometimes it is traced back to a bad experience. Also, if the owner is nervous about loud noise and storms, the animal may be as well."

From a dog's point of view, an event like the Fourth of July "sounds like the sky is falling down. Why wouldn't they be scared?" said Jules Benson, BVSc, MRCVS, director of veterinary services for Petplan, a national pet health insurance company, and staff veterinarian at Doylestown Animal Medical Clinic, Doylestown, Pa.

The news behind the noise

Fear of loud noises may actually be a learned, reinforced response that worsens over time, Gladstein said. "We may condition them to this response by comforting them. Therefore, they get attention when acting fearful."

Some dogs not only have more sensitive ears, but also more sensitive personalities for reasons that scientists don't understand, said Justine A. Lee, DVM, associate director of veterinary services, Pet Poison Helpline, Bloomington, Minn.

Steve Brooks, CPDT (certified pet dog trainer), based in Los Angeles, Calif., trainer of the winning dog – a boxer named Presley – on "Greatest American Dog," a reality TV show that aired on CBS last summer, said that two reasons are at the root of noise-provoking fears in dogs: innate and learned behaviors.

"The former derives from genetics and is harder to fix, while the latter is from the dog's environment," Brooks said. Learned behaviors like fear of loud sounds may arise "if the dog

didn't get proper and early socialization and exposure to different environments as a puppy. A dog that is also clingy and overattached to its owner may exhibit insecurity problems like these, too."

Signs of a petrified pooch

Gladstein, Benson and Lee said that common behavioral symptoms associated with noise anxiety may include:

- * Hiding
- * Cowering and trembling
- * Urinating and/or defecating
- * Panting
- * Pacing and circling
- * Digging or jumping in an attempt to escape
- * Passing gas
- * Barking and whining

A pet owner should be concerned about this behavior "because you want to keep the stress level down for overall health reasons. The less stressful your life, the longer you live," Gladstein said

Rx for Rex

Lee said veterinarians often prescribe medications that, when used as directed, can help during an anxiety episode due to noise.

"The most common drug prescribed is acepromazine, a nonaddictive sedative that is really good, but doesn't do anything to relieve the anxiety," Lee said. "It can be used in young to middle-aged dogs and in certain breeds of older dogs, but it's not recommended for dogs with any underlying heart or blood pressure problems."

A newer medication gaining in popularity is oral valium, an anxiolytic drug that can actually decrease canine anxiety, Lee said. Like acepromazine, valium is reasonably safe, but it can cause liver complications when used in large or frequent doses.

"Any medication used to calm a dog is best given at least 30 to 60 minutes before the loud noises start," Benson said. "It can be useful to confine your dog in a dark room as far from the noise as possible."

Like many vets and dog experts, however, Gladstein is not a fan of drugs to treat doggie noise phobias.

“Medicating your pet can actually make its fears worse,” Gladstein said. Sedated pets “still experience the noise, but physically can’t react. This continues the cycle and the need for drugs. Prescription drugs should be used only with behavior modification programs under the supervision of a trained veterinarian.”

Instead of prescribed drugs, Brooks touts herbal remedies, including lavender oil, geranium scent, chamomile, peppermint extract and a product called D.A.P. – dog appeasing pheromone – that can help to relax dogs.

“Having a trainer or behavioral specialist work with your pet is the best way to approach this from a behavioral point of view,” Benson said, adding that certain dogs such as collies and sheep dogs (the herding breeds) are particularly sensitive to harsh noises.

Massage the message

Brooks recommends massage therapy to condition your dog to relax during a loud event. Try the following tips:

Get your dog to lie on its side and give it a thorough massage.

As you massage, let your dog smell lavender oil, which can induce a calming effect. Repeat this practice once a day over a few days.

Obtain a “sound effects” CD that plays noises like a rainstorm or fireworks. Play the CD at low volume while giving the massage and letting your dog sniff lavender oil. Gradually turn up the volume every few days.

The next time a loud event occurs in the neighborhood, such as a thunderstorm, massage your dog and bring the lavender oil up to its nose.

If your dog continues to display signs of anxiety in response to noisy stimuli, don’t reinforce the behavior by giving a treat, coddling or reassuring your dog with sympathetic words.

Instead, try to ignore the behavior; act happily and fearlessly. Praise and reward the dog with a treat when it displays signs of confidence and noise tolerance.

Gladstein also advises these steps:

Instead of a sound effects CD, introduce a white noise of some kind (a noisy fan, for example), the volume of which you can gradually increase over time to desensitize your dog.

Try counterconditioning: If your dog enjoys a car ride, take it for a spin during a loud event so that it associates the noise with something it likes to do.

Arrange for a play date with other dogs on a day when you know a loud event is coming. Your dog may be so busy having fun that the noises won't bother it.

Consider alternative forms of therapy, including acupuncture and chiropractic treatments.

Forecasting future fears

It is possible for dogs to outgrow these fears if you work with them regularly, Lee said. "But the truth is that some dogs will always need some form of medical or behavioral therapy to cope with these issues."

In this event, the upside of your dog getting older is that "sometimes, as a dog becomes deafer with age, the noises don't affect them because they just can't hear as well," Benson said.

Brooks said the key to preventing behavioral problems like noise anxiety is to start as early as possible. That means the next time you get a puppy, introduce it to various sounds, people and environments and train it to follow basic commands like "sit," "stay," "come" and "don't pull" on the leash.

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