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FIREWORK AND THUNDERSTORM PHOBIAS

How to deal with the problem in the short term.

Drugs

These may be useful in some cases but should only be given under veterinary supervision. Remember they should be given so they take effect BEFORE any noise starts or panic sets in. This is usually at least an hour prior to the event. Sedatives may help the pet sleep through the event or be less aware of the stimuli but do not reduce anxiety. Anti-anxiety drugs may reduce anxiety and panic but may not calm the dog sufficiently. There are also drugs such as some of the antidepressants that can be used on an ongoing basis to try and prevent or reduce the effect of the stimulus should it arise. Then, short term drugs on the day of the fireworks (or storm) may be added to some of these drugs if needed. The dog appeasing pheromone (DAP®) and natural products such as melatonin might also be considered concurrently with other drugs.

Punishment

Don't punish your dog when he is scared, it only confirms to him that there is something to be afraid of and will make him worse. In addition, if you are upset or anxious about your pet's behavior, this will also make your dog more anxious.

Reassurance

Don't fuss, pet or try to reassure your dog when he is scared since he may regard this as a reward for the behavior he is engaging in at that time, so that with each future exposure the behavior may become increasingly intense. Although it may be difficult, try to ignore any fearful behavior that occurs.

Training devices and commands

Practice training your dog to settle and focus on commands for favored treats and toys. Try and associate this training with a favored location in the house (one where the noise of the fireworks and storm might be less obvious – see below), and use some training cues (e.g. a favored CD, a favored blanket) each time you do the training (so that the command, location and cues help



to immediately calm the dog). A head halter can also be used to help control, distract and calm the dog during training. Then at the time of the storm, use your commands, location, cues and head halter to try and calm the dog, while avoiding punishment or reassurance of the fearful response (see above).

Feeding

Feed your dog a good meal, rich in carbohydrate and with added vitamin B6, a few hours prior to the expected fireworks (or storm). To ensure a good appetite, it may be necessary not to feed him at any other time during the day. However, if your dog is prone to diarrhea when scared or at other times, please consult your veterinarian for advice regarding this strategy.

Environment

Make sure that the environment is safe and secure at all times. Even the most placid dog can behave unpredictably when frightened by noise and, should he bolt and escape, he could get injured or lost.

Can I do anything to reduce the impact of the noise and flashes from the fireworks or storms?

When the season begins, try to ensure that your dog can reside in a well-curtained or blacked out room when it starts to go dark. Blacking out the room removes the potentially additional problems of flashing lights, flares etc.

Provide plenty of familiar toys and games that might help to distract the pet.

Try to arrange company for your dog so that he is not abandoned in the room.

Make sure that all the windows and doors are shut so the sound is deadened as much as possible. Try taking your pet to a room or area of the house where the stimuli will be at their mildest and the dog can be most easily distracted. Sometimes nested cardboard boxes or a blanket placed over the cage can greatly mute the sound. Be certain however that there is enough air circulation so that the pet does not overheat.

Try to provide background sounds from the radio or television. Rap or similar music with a lot of constant drum beats does help. It does not necessarily have to be loud as long as there is a constant distracting beat to the music that will prevent him from concentrating on the noises outside. Other background noises and such as a fan running or even "white" noise devices can help to block outdoor noises.



Ignore the noises yourself and try to involve your pet in some form of active game.

Some products and exercises might be useful to further secure or calm the dog. Anxiety wraps, a cape or mat that reduces static, a head halter for control or TTouch therapy may help to calm the dog further.

My friend down the street has a dog that is not scared of loud noises and gets along well with mine. She has offered to lend me her dog for support. Shall I accept?

This may be an excellent strategy. Keeping the two together during the evenings may help. Playing with the non-fearful dog when your own becomes scared may help to encourage him to join in and reduce his fear.

Is there anything else that I can do that is worthwhile?

Don't just ignore the problem because it only happens intermittently or for a few days each year. Instigate a desensitization program once the season is over so that you ensure your dog loses fear of the situation. Additional handouts are available that can help explain exactly how to go about this.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB
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