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Noise & storm phobias and your dog

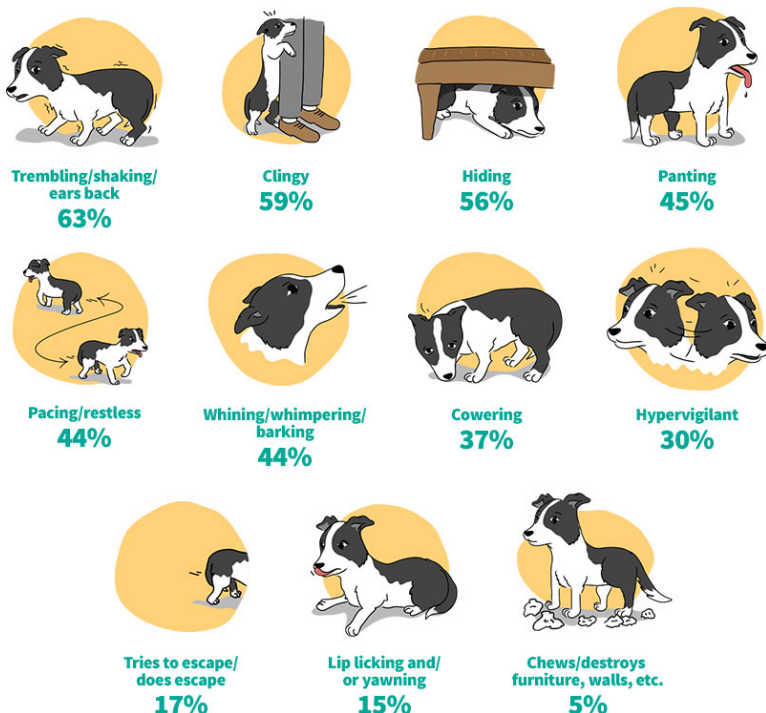
What are noise phobias?

Noise phobias are described as fear responses that occur when a dog is exposed to certain noises and events such as storms, fireworks, smoke alarms, car backfires, vacuum cleaners and many others. These fear responses can worsen over time and may seem to start without any noticeable event. Many dogs experience storm phobias in particular, but similar responses may occur with other types of loud noises.

How are storm phobias different?

Storm fear responses may not only be towards the sounds of rain and thunder, but to many other cues such as dull lighting and lightening. Some dogs will display fear behaviours even when we are not aware of a storm. This is attributed to dogs' keen senses that cause them to react to other events such as atmospheric changes in pressure, ionisation, static electricity and smells.

What signs would I see if my dog is noise phobic?



Many behaviours can be associated with fear, but the most commonly observed behaviours are:

- Panting
- Inability to settle, and pacing
- Seeking the owner, clingy
- Hiding
- Trembling and muscle tension
- Dilated pupils
- Inappropriate urination and diarrhoea
- Escaping – scrambling at doors or windows
- Vocalisation – barking, howling, crying
- Self-harm – licking/chewing at feet or tail
- Destruction – destruction of household and property such as furniture, doors, shoes, dog beds, etc.

Source: www.zoetis.com

What does this mean for my dog?

It is important to understand that fear disorders and phobias are considered **medical conditions**, and are not an obedience problem. During periods of noise exposure, the dog's danger response is activated and the animal ceases to process information in its normal way, but responds only to the perceived "threat". The dog isn't being naughty when it causes destruction, or disobedient when it doesn't settle down in its bed.

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when it's told. It is then very important to understand that **punishing the dog will only make the behaviour worse.**

What can I do to try to manage the behaviour?

Many steps can be taken to help manage your dog's fear, and not all methods work the same for every dog. At its very core, fear management is about prevention. **Every bad experience worsens the next.** Early intervention is key to trying to break the fear cycle. Identifying the early signs and acting upon them can help reduce the severity of your dog's condition.

The best way to protect against the development of noise fears is to associate the noise with something pleasurable; **good things happen when the noise occurs.** This can be started as early as puppyhood by exposing your puppy to certain noises and making it a positive experience by providing treats, praise, comfort and games. The more times an animal experiences an event that causes them fear and activates their "danger centre", the more likely they will begin to respond to smaller triggers. For example, a fire alarm going off after the toast has been burnt and your dog may pace and seem unsettled. The next time the dog may start to pant and hide with just the smell of burnt toast. The next time the dog may panic simply at the sight of the toaster.

Several steps can be taken to protect your dog from fear and manage it when it occurs. **Avoidance of the "bad feelings"** is key in behaviour management.

1. Prediction

Prediction is easier with certain events such as storms and fireworks. Weather forecasters tend to over-predict storm occurrences, and most storms occur in the afternoon or evening. If you can predict a storm then remove your dog from the yard and try to move them to a more sound-proof area of the house, and begin other management protocols as will be outlined later. Being home and present with your dog, if at all possible, will reduce the risk of them causing damage to the house or yard, and more importantly, to themselves.

2. Minimise stimulation

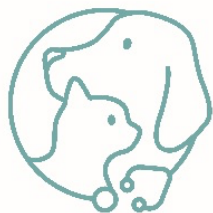
Stimulation comes in visual and auditory forms. Auditory stimulation can be minimised with sound-proofing and/or masking noises. Try to find the most sound-proof area of the house and use that area during the event. Brick walls are better at sound-proofing than timber; walk-in wardrobes are surrounded by many walls and your clothing will dampen a lot of noise as well; consider adding sound-proof cladding and foam/mattresses to a chosen room. Having the TV or radio on can also help to mask some noise. Try a few different types/genres of music to find what works the best for your dog.

Visual stimulation can be minimised by closing the blinds or curtains, and leaving the room's light on so that flashes aren't as obvious.

3. Creating a "den"

Creating a safe environment for your dog can help give them a sense of security during periods of fear and stress. A carrier, crate or box can be used in these situations. The den can be anywhere such as the laundry, bathroom, garage, your bedroom or wardrobe. Be mindful of sound-proofing,

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and temperature control as well. The den should stay cool in hot weather and be free from dangerous chemicals. Add in comforting blankets or beds to the crate, and cover most of it with a sheet or blanket. The dog can be fed in the den as well to try to give more positive reinforcement.

4. Comfort

Praise and comfort can help to alleviate some fear and stress. Some sources will say that providing comfort and praise rewards the fearful behaviour and will reinforce it. Many behaviourists now believe this attitude is nonsense. Current recommendations are to do whatever you need to do to create calmness for your dog. This can be as simple as giving comfort and attention. Some other techniques are:

- Calming massage: Concentrate on major muscle groups such as cheek, forehead, neck, and shoulder muscles. Use a firm finger-tip massage in a small circle.
- Body wrap: Wrap your dog's body firmly in a towel or use a Thunder Shirt to provide gentle compression over large areas of the body.
- Showing your dog that YOU are calm: Quiet voices, relaxed and "normal" behaviour can help to reinforce to your dog that you are not worried by the events. Dogs often feed off the emotional states of their trusted humans, and your behaviour can help to provide a sense of calm in the situation.

5. Pheromones

"Dog Appeasing Pheromones" are synthetic mixtures of compounds identified from scent glands associated with mammary tissue of lactating female dogs feeding puppies. Adaptil diffusers or sprays can be used to mimic the calming sensation felt by feeding puppies in adult dogs during periods of stress. Adaptil can be used with up to 70% effectiveness.

6. Using medications

Medication such as tranquilisers work in conjunction with other management protocols. Tranquilisers form a critical part of "avoidance" by trying to stop the fear and anxiety that drives the behaviour cycle. Remember, every bad experience makes the next one worse. Using medications can help to prevent a bad experience. Many people are reluctant to use medications, but their value and effectiveness is often underestimated. Using medications early in the cycle can help to break the cycle and prevent the behaviours from getting worse. Speak with your vet about which medications might be helpful for your dog.

Managing noise and storm phobias in your dog may be a long process. Any kind of behaviour management or modification is a long process that requires patience and persistence.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact our friendly team on 07 3297 0803, or come in and speak with us about how we can help you and your dog.

Information sourced from The Australian Veterinary Association, and Cam Day Consulting.

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