

Dogs Fear of Thunder & Lightning

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There are various environmental sounds that cause a dog to become afraid or frightened. It doesn't matter whether the animal is living in a crowded metropolitan city or a spacious rural town; the chance of inclement weather causing physical and/or mental distress is high. A dog's fears of noise and light are big concerns for pet owners, but there are ways to decrease your dog's fear of lightning and thunder.

Dog owners worry that a dog will become frightened during a thunderstorm. This fear results from the appearance and sound of lightning and thunder. Dogs have an instinctual fear of loud noises and flashing light. When two clouds are separated by a lightning bolt,

then re-merge, a flash of light and sustained, loud 'rumble' occur. Upon seeing the flash, dogs are alerted, knowing that the sharp 'crack' of thunder will follow and scare them.

When animals become fearful, their immediate reaction is physical. Dogs that fear lightning and/or thunder may react with destructive behavior. Upon hearing thunder in a thunderstorm, a dog may run frantically around the house or yard, or search for a safe place to hide. This behavior is intensified and prolonged when the animal has been left alone during inclement weather. A related, physical reaction to lightning or thunder is the animal's desire to escape. A dog might try to leave their house or yard in the hope of finding an area where there are no frightening sights or sounds. Pet owners need to understand that, when there is lightning or a thunderstorm, their dog might escape from the yard and get lost or run into traffic.

A pet owner's fears can be alleviated when they become proactive with their pets. Helping a dog prepare for lightning or thunder can reduce or eliminate fear and prevent the animal's desire to hide or escape. One technique to help a dog cope with lightning or thunder involves refocusing its attention. When inclement weather is developing, the pet owner should be home with the dog. When the dog begins to exhibit audible or physical signs of anxiety, the owner redirects the dog's attention to a distracting activity. This could include sitting or lying next to the owner, being petted, or playing with a favorite toy. Also, a T.V. or radio may cover the sounds of the storm. Closing drapes or blinds is also a good idea. Timing is important with this intervention; the dog must be distracted and re-engaged immediately just prior to or upon experiencing fear of the lightning or thunder. Also, if the owner's attempts at distraction fail initially, the process should be continued. When the dog successfully becomes engaged in a stress-reducing activity, the owner can provide rewards such as dog treats or verbal and physical praise.

The best way to eliminate a dog's fear of thunder is to accustom the animal to loud noises from an early age. But, it's never too late to use this technique, no matter how old the dog is. The procedure is to expose the dog to some loud noises each day, praising and rewarding the dog when fear is not shown. Start with very soft noises, such as tapping two spoons together or waving aluminum foil. When the dog shows no fear of those actions, try dropping a plastic bottle or tapping on a metal pan. When the dog loses fear of those actions, move on to beating a drum, popping a balloon, or dropping a metal pan onto concrete. This procedure must be continued all through the dog's life to maintain its acceptance of loud noises. Even if the dog seems comfortable with loud noises like these, it is important to make sure it is exposed to thunder and lightning as little as possible and has a safe place to go if a storm occurs while the animal is alone at home.

A method of providing protection for a dog during lightning or thunder is to make a 'safety zone,' inside or outside the house. Dogs like the feeling of physical security when they experience fear. Smaller dogs will

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hide under a bed; larger dogs will seek out an area under a coffee table or other piece of furniture. Pet owners can easily create a safety zone that resembles a cave, which was the original 'dog house' for four-legged animals. A cave can easily be constructed using a wooden or cardboard box and some blankets. In addition, the pet owner can place some dog toys and a water dish inside the box, which will increase the animal's feelings of security. A manufactured dog house will also work fine, as long as it is not made of metal. Put the dog house in a sheltered area outdoors, if possible.

A concerned, responsible pet owner will secure the home environment, provide security and distractions for his or her dog, and desensitize the animal before inclement weather produces thunder and/or lightning, scaring the animal. These are the best ways to decrease your dog's fear of thunder and lightning.

About the Author:

David Beart is owner of the Professors House , a site dedicated to family, relationships, dog health , and household issues.

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