

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training

Noise Phobia in Dogs

It is unknown why some pets become afraid of noises such as thunder and fireworks and some don't. A fear can soon become a phobia, which is defined as a persistent, excessive, and irrational fear response. In the case of thunderstorms, pets may also be fearful of storm-associated events such as a change in barometric pressure, lightning, electrostatic disturbances, and even smells associated with the storms. Noise phobias can include fear of thunderstorms, fireworks, gunshots, a garbage truck, the vacuum cleaner, etc.

A noise phobia may be traced to a specific noise, and in most cases, the fear of noises and storms escalates, worsening with each exposure. Soon the pet may become fearful of similar sounds or events associated with the noise. For example, a dog is afraid of thunder may also become afraid of rain, or a dog afraid of gunshots may show fear at the mere sight of a hunting rifle.

The owner's mind-set can influence the severity of the dogs fear. For instance, if the owner is nervous during storms, noise phobias in their pets may occur more often or become more severe. If the owner tries to reassure the dog, it reinforces the fear by confirming there really is something to be afraid of.

Since dogs are pack animals and look to you, the pack leader, for guidance and reassurance. Adopt an easy-going manner and remain calm in the face of your dog's fear and anxiety.

What are the signs of noise phobia?

- Hiding (most common sign in cats)
- Urinating and or defecating
- Chewing
- Excessive panting
- Pacing
- Trying to escape (digging, jumping through windows or going through walls, running away)
- Drooling
- Seeking the owner
- Not eating
- Not listening to commands
- Trembling or shaking
- Dilated pupils
- Vocalizing (barking or whining)
- Trying to escape
- Destructive behavior

Common Behaviors

The common behavior problems linked with fear of loud noises are destruction and escaping. When your dog becomes frightened, he/she tries to reduce the fear. The dog may try to escape to a place

where the sounds of thunder or firecrackers are not as intense. If he/she feels less afraid by leaving the yard or going into another room or area of the house, then the escape or destructive behavior is reinforced because it successfully lessens the fear. Unfortunately, escape and/or destructive behavior can be a problem for you and could also result in physical injury to your dog.

Fear by Association

Your dog may also begin to associate a particular startling noise with other things in his/her environment and may become afraid of these other things because it is associated with the loud noise that frightens him/her. For example, dogs that are afraid of thunder may later become afraid of the wind, dark clouds and flashes of light that often precede the sound of thunder. In addition, dogs who do not like the sound of firecrackers may become fearful of the children who have the firecrackers or may become afraid to go into the backyard, if that's where they have heard the noise.

How to Help Your Dog

Once you have determined the source of your dog's fear, you can be prepared to help him/her stay calm during the event. The goal is to eventually desensitize your dog to the stimulus so he/she is no longer afraid. Below are some ideas to help your dog cope and hopefully overcome their fear(s).

Create a safe spot

First, create a safe spot for your dog to go to when he/she hears the noises that create a fear reaction. Remember for this to work, it must be a safe location from his/her perspective, not yours. Take note of where your dog goes when he/she is frightened. If possible, give her access to that place. For example, if she's trying to get inside the house, consider installing a dog door. If she's trying to get under your bed, give her access to your bedroom.

If your dog is crate trained, he/she may like to use the crate as the safe spot. To make it more den-like, cover the top and sides with a blanket. You can also add a piece of clothing that has been worn by someone in the family for a sense of security.

When the trigger (scary noise) is happening, persuade her to go to the safe spot while you are at home. Consider turning a household appliance on to defuse the noise, such as the dishwasher, dryer, a fan or radio near the source of the noise to help block out the sound. Feed your dog in that location and help your dog associate that spot with other "good things" happening to him/her there. He/she must be able to come and go from this location freely. Do not confine your dog to the safe spot! It could only cause more problems. She should be able to come and go freely.

The safe spot approach may work with some dogs, but not all. Some dogs are so nervous they pace and are active when frightened and "hiding out" won't help them feel less fearful. See below for more information.

A product called The Thunder Shirt® is a great tool that can help to relieve anxiety. It works for about 80% of dogs and may be worth a try: <http://www.thundershirt.com>

The Art of Distraction

This process works best when your dog is just starting to show signs of fear. Encourage your dog to engage in an activity that captures his/her attention and distracts them from the fear.

When you first notice your dog is alerted to the noise, but is not yet showing fearful behavior, you can start the distraction. Watch very carefully, if he/she is too far into the behavior you probably will not be successful getting his/her attention.

Immediately try to interest him/her in doing something that he/she really enjoys. In a fenced yard (safely enclosed area), try playing fetch with her favorite toy or ball. Practice some training commands that your dog already knows. Reward, reward, reward with praise and treats for paying attention to the game or the commands.

As the storm or other noise builds, you may not be able to keep her attention on the activity, but it might delay the start of the fearful behavior for longer and longer each time you work the process. If you can't keep her attention and she begins acting fearfully, **stop!** Take him/her inside the house so she has access to her safe spot.

Desensitizing the Fear Reaction

Behavior modification techniques are often successful in reducing fears and phobias. The treatments are called "counter-conditioning" and "desensitization." These techniques must be introduced very gradually to successfully teach your dog to respond in a non-fearful manner.

There are companies that make CDs for noise phobia issues: see below for links. You can also record your own, download an MP3 version or buy a CD with the appropriate sound(s) such as, thunder, fireworks, vacuum cleaners, etc.

Start by exposing your dog to a very low intensity level of noise that doesn't frighten your dog and pairing the noise with something pleasant; for example, a treat or a fun game. Gradually **increase the volume very slowly** over the course of days, and maybe weeks.

It's critical to note your dog's threshold; this is right before he/she starts to display any reaction to the feared sound. It could be the eyes start to dart, he/she starts panting, barking, pacing, and maybe backs up and runs away, etc. The idea is to work just under their threshold by starting so low you can barely hear anything, and gradually increase the volume at the dog's pace (not what we think they should be able to stand). It is important to only increase the volume to the dog's threshold and not beyond. You could do irreversible damage if you move too fast.

While playing the CD on a very low volume, continue to offer a yummy treat (cooked chicken pieces, cheese, or hotdog, etc). Through this process, your dog will come to associate "good things" with the previously feared sound. If she starts to behave fearfully, stop feeding! You don't want your dog to associate fear with food (most dogs displaying fear will not want to eat anyway).

You may need professional assistance to create and implement this kind of behavior modification program.

Consult Your Veterinarian

There are medications available by subscription that may be able to help reduce your dog's anxiety levels for short time periods. Your veterinarian is the only person who is qualified and licensed to prescribe medication for your dog.

Consult your veterinarian before giving your dog any over the counter medication. Animals don't respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for humans could be fatal to your dog. Drug therapy alone won't reduce fears and phobias permanently, but in extreme cases, behavior modification and medication used together might be the best approach.

Do Not:

Do not attempt to reassure your dog when he/she is afraid. This may only reinforce his/her fearful behavior. If you pet, soothe, or give treats when behaving fearfully, he/she may interpret this as a reward for fearful behavior. Instead, try to behave normally and stay calm as if you don't notice the fearfulness.

Do not punish your dog for being afraid. Punishment will only make him/her more fearful.

Do not try to force your dog to experience or be close to the sound that frightens them. For example, making him/her stay close to a group of children who are lighting firecrackers will only increase fear and could cause aggressive behavior and attempts to escape from the situation.

These approaches will fail because they will not improve your dog's fear. Simply trying to prevent your dog from escaping or being destructive won't work! If your dog is still afraid, he/she will continue to show that fear in whatever way possible.

DO NOT leave your dog outside unattended during known conditions such as: fireworks, the city workers in the street with machines, or thunder storms. When your dog panics, adrenaline plays a part of the behavior and he/she can do more damage. There have been reports of dogs frantically digging under the fence, chewing through the fence, or jumping over the fence to get away from the noise.

Noise phobia is traumatic enough without having to pick your dog up from Animal Control, or worse, searching for your lost dog.

Prevention

To prevent noise phobias, you would start as a puppy, as early as 8 weeks. There are CDs for all kinds of noises, from common household noises to fireworks. Exposure to a wide range of sounds early in the dog's life will often prevent the development of phobias.

If you have just adopted an adult dog, you may want to introduce them to these noises to understand what phobias they may have before they happen.

CDs and MP3 downloads to help desensitize your dog

Traffic sounds, MP3

<http://sounddogs.com/results.asp?Type=1&CategoryID=1052&SubcategoryID=7>

Thunderstorms

<http://www.calmaudio.com/thunderstorms.html>

Fireworks

<http://www.calmaudio.com/fireworks.html>

Puppy Sounds

<http://www.calmaudio.com/puppy.html>

<http://www.partnersinrhyme.com/soundfx/dogsounds.shtml>

Multiple Noise CDs

<http://beemp3.com/download.php?file=7563593&song=Sound+Effects+-+Birds%2CLight%2CRoosters%2CTraffic>

<http://www.scarednomore.com/>

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/calm-pet-desensitizing-sounds/id294630532>

Sources

<http://www.peteducation.com/article>

The Humane Society of the United States