



HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY

Behavior Modification Handout

Noise Phobias in Dogs

If your dog is experiencing fear during a thunderstorm and the 4th of July is no picnic well, you're not alone. It is very common for dogs to be sensitive to loud noises. Determining the level of your dog's sensitivity or fear response will help you to develop a behavior modification plan to ease your dog's anxiety. Some dogs may just shake a little and try to stay close to you while experiencing fear, while other dogs may experience a truly phobic reaction and become destructive in their environment and try to escape. In either situation it is important to find the trigger for your dog's fear and work towards reducing the stress and anxiety your dog is suffering with.

Possible Triggers and Behaviors Associated with Fear and Stress

Reducing your pet's fear and stress with a behavior modification plan will involve determining what your dog is afraid of and how it is affecting his behavior. Some common triggers for fearful behavior are:

- Thunderstorms (Brontophobia)
- Fireworks
- Fire trucks / Motorcycles / Airplanes (unusually loud engine noise)
- Vacuum Cleaners (loud household appliances)
- Sudden unexpected loud noises – popping balloon, car backfire, etc.

Your pet may experience fear from a number of noisy situations and narrowing it down to the one that causes your pet to exhibit signs of stress and anxiety will help you move forward with a treatment plan. Some common fearful behaviors your pet may experience as a result of a noise stimulus are:

- Hiding under furniture or in other dark secluded areas
- Shaking
- Avoidance behaviors (running away / escaping)
- Defensive aggression (growling, barking, lunging)
- Fearful body postures – submissive (curling up into a ball and making themselves small, ears flattened, head and body held low)
- Destructive behaviors (often a result of escape attempts)
- Vocalization
- Uncontrolled urination or defecation
- Drooling and or panting
- Pacing or unwillingness to lie down or stay in one place
- Shedding

Very intense fear behaviors will be more complicated to modify. You may need to seek professional help from a behaviorist if your pet's fearful response is severe or if after a period of training your pet's condition has not improved.

Managing Your Environment

Having identified what is producing your dog's fear-related behaviors and determined the level of fear your dog is experiencing, you can begin to improve your pet's life by reducing his emotional fear. Often managing your environment by limiting exposure to the stimulus or anticipating the onset of anxiety and distracting or redirecting your pet can be helpful in resolving minor issues. For example, if your dog is nervous around fireworks you can knowingly anticipate that the 4th of July and New Years will be target days for anxiety and fear in your pet. Put an action plan in place:

- Plan an active day for your pet with plenty of exercise and one on one time. This will help to create a tired and relaxed atmosphere.
- Create a safe place for your pet (they may have already chosen a location they prefer) with a soft bed and favorite toys.
- The use of oral herbal calming remedies to take the edge off is often enough in mild cases to help your dog to relax. DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) plug in and sprays can also help to reduce stress in your dog's environment.
- Massaging your pet or using Tellington Touch techniques will reassure and help to calm some pets.
- During the actual event distract your dog with a favorite game he enjoys. This will take his mind off the scary noises and associate something good with the event.
- Food distractions (treats) may also be helpful.
- Do not be afraid to soothe your dog with kind words and petting. Fear is an emotion and not a behavior.

Helping your pet through a mild fear episode can be more successful if you plan ahead. A phobic response may be much more intense and is often identified with destructive, escape behaviors. Your pet is trying to escape the thing that is causing the fear. A phobia is defined as a fear response that is persistent, maladaptive, and out of proportion to the situation. Resolving phobic fear issues often require the assistance of a behaviorist and or your veterinarian.

Reducing Anxiety and Building Confidence

The goal with the behavior modification plan will be to change the way your pet feels about the things he is most afraid of. Your goal is to have your dog experience a pleasant outcome (food treat, verbal praise, playing with a favorite toy or anything he may see as a reward) whenever he encounters the frightening stimulus. It will be very important to proceed with these exercises at a gradual pace and allow plenty of time for your dog or puppy to become adjusted to this new experience before proceeding. Never force your pet into an interaction with a frightening stimulus and always start from his level of tolerance. If you see a stress or fearful response from your pet then you have gone too far ahead in the training and will need to go back and repeat certain exercises until your pet is more comfortable. For purposes of instruction, we will outline an exercise for your dog to help reduce the anxiety associated with thunderstorms.

The type of training you will be using is counter-conditioning and desensitizing and the same process will work with a variety of fear-inducing stimulus.

- Purchase or make your own recording of a thunderstorm.
- In your first training session play the recording at a very low volume so that a fear response is not elicited in your pet. Play your dog's favorite game and feed him special treats. Give positive attention to create a good association with the background noise (the thunderstorm recording).
- In your next session gradually increase the volume of the recording while providing the positive reinforcement.
- If you notice any fearful response you have gone beyond your dog's threshold of tolerance. Stop and take a break, reduce the volume and continue at a slower pace.
- Gradually increase the volume over a period of weeks or months.
- This type of training will require short, frequent training sessions. Your dog's fear will not subside over night. Changing an emotional response to something scary will take time and patience.

It may be difficult to completely recreate all the components of a thunderstorm. Lightning, wind, changes in barometric pressure and darkness; some or all of these things may already be precursors to your dog's fear episodes by creating anticipatory anxiety. Trying to duplicate the triggers at significantly lower exposure levels will allow your dog to associate good things (playing with you and getting treats) with the onset of the scary thing (thunderstorm).

Avoiding the Pitfalls

You should never punish your dog or puppy for having a fearful response. Using punishment will only cause your pet to be more frightened and complicate the training process. Punishment will not help your pet to overcome his fears and accept a frightening situation as non-threatening. Using a desensitizing process will gradually help your pet be less frightened and more confident in his environment.

Tips and Hints

- Never force your pet to interact with something he is afraid of. Trying to show him there is "nothing to be afraid of" will only cause him to experience the situation under extreme stress and possibly make the problem and the fear worse.
- Providing a safe place for your pet such as a spare bedroom where his feeding area and sleeping area can be isolated from the rest of the house is important and allows him to have a comfortable refuge.
- Avoid any new stimulus if your dog is already fearful and keep his routine as normal as possible.
- Always make sure the behavior problem your pet is experiencing is not related to a medical condition and review your pet's problem thoroughly with your vet.
- Helping your pet work through his fear-related issues will take time. There is no "quick fix." Patience will be an important factor in the success of your pet's adjustment and acclimation.
- Exercise can help to reduce stress. Find an activity your dog enjoys and take time to play a fun game with him.