

Thunderstorm Phobia

Thunderstorm Phobia is very common in dogs. Below are some suggestions to help your dog overcome his fear of the thunder through the process of desensitization and counterconditioning. This program is designed to help your dog change the way he feels during a thunderstorm and can be very effective. Unfortunately, some dogs also react to the lightning and the pressure changes associated with storms. These are harder things to control and may make your desensitization program go slower than you hoped.

Desensitization involves slowly exposing your pet to the fearful stimulus, increasing the intensity of the stimulus over time, until he no longer reacts fearfully when exposed to it. In this case the stimulus is the loud booming thunder. We often combine desensitization with counterconditioning.

Counterconditioning is a procedure where by you work to change your pet's emotional response to the fearful stimulus, from one of fear to one of acceptance, by pairing it with special treats or fun activities.

Desensitization / Counterconditioning procedure:

Purchase a thunderstorm desensitization CD rom (www.dogwise.com). Start by playing the CD at a volume that you can hardly hear in another room away from your dog (remember that dog's have much better hearing than we do). While playing the thunderstorm CD you will offer your dog the most wonderful special treats in the world or play his favorite game (as long as he is calm - if he reacts to hearing the CD it is probably too loud). Offer the treats or play the whole time the CD is playing. By pairing the special treats or event with the sound of the thunderstorm, you will be changing your dog's emotional response to the noise. He will soon associate thunder with special treats or game.

Over time you will increase the volume little by little. **It is very important to go very slow with this procedure. Never increase the intensity of the stimuli until your dog is perfectly comfortable at the current level.** When he remains relaxed and looks at you for a treat when he hears the thunder you know that you can then increase the volume for the next session. Repeat this procedure until you can play the thunderstorm CD at an extremely loud volume and your dog remains calm. This process may take a few weeks or a few months, depending on the time you put into it and the intensity of your dogs phobia.

While you are working though this procedure it is very likely that a real live storm will occur. Your dog will probably still react to the real storm in his normal fearful way even if he is doing well with the program. **It is extremely important that you comfort the dog in any way that you can during the scary storm.** If you notice that at some point he stops pacing, panting, shivering, etc. reward the calm behavior with a special food treat.

Your dog may need medical intervention to help overcome his thunderstorm phobia. Your veterinarian can prescribe a sedative to be given the day of the storm.