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TREATMENT OF FIREWORK AND THUNDERSTORM FEARS AND PHOBIAS IN DOGS

How is this problem treated?

It has been found that the best approach to this problem is to treat the dog by systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning. Information sheets are available explaining these techniques and more detail can be found in the handout on 'Fears and phobias - noises and places'.

When is the best time to start treatment?

This should be done at a time of year when fireworks or thunderstorms are not likely to be used so that you have control over the situation.

How do I start this systematic desensitisation and counter-conditioning programme?

The dog is trained to 'sit' and 'relax' on command with gentle reassuring tones. A good walk or exercise first will make relaxation easier. When this has become established the training can be tested in the face of some distraction. Remember to always reward the dog when the task is successfully accomplished. Initially food rewards may be used, but later soothing praise is the best reward. Once sitting and relaxation has been achieved the training should be tested in the face of some distraction. Some owners and handlers find that success can be achieved faster and more consistently throughout the program by using a restraint and control device such as a head halter.



How do I organize the distraction?

Once you have your dog sitting and obviously relaxed and this has been repeated several times, try simple distractions such as having another member of the family approach or even another pet, if available. Once you are confident that your dog will remain sitting then desensitization may begin.

How do I organize desensitization?

For fireworks either a variety of audio and video recordings of the noise or a cap gun can be used, whichever is capable of reproducing the fear response. It is important to start off with a noise at a volume

that does not elicit any distress. The starting sound sometimes may be barely audible. For this reason it is probably better to have a record of a firework display rather than using a cap gun. If a cap gun has to be used, this can be recorded and then played at minimal volume. Alternatively, the gun can be muffled



Desensitization

using cardboard boxes and towels. Using a stereo “surround-sound” recording system is more likely to produce a sound that is most similar to the actual stimulus (fireworks). This same technique can also be used for thunderstorm phobias, using a video or audio recording of an actual storm. It is much harder to reproduce the actual event for retraining since the noise is not the only element of a thunderstorm and changes in barometric pressure, rain on the windows, darkening skies and flashes and bolts of lightening cannot be reproduced for retraining purposes.

Put your dog on the ‘relax’ command and then employ another member of the family or assistant to praise and reassure it for staying calm. If the correct response is not achieved, the behavior should be ignored and then go back several steps until you are sure that your assistant is able to achieve a ‘sit’ and ‘relax’ which is the first part of the program.

Initiate the stimulus at the lowest volume possible. If there is a reaction the behavior should be ignored until your pet is settled after which it can again be given a treat. Then, once settled, try again to distract the dog at the same time with a much lower volume of the stimulus. Again the head halter might be a better way to gain control and insure that it focuses on the owner.

For how long do I repeat this part of the program?

It is important that you do not overdo it. After every few bangs give a special treat, play with the dog or initiate some particularly pleasurable activity. Make this the end of your first session. It is important you always end a session on a high note with a good response, even if that means turning the volume right down again.

When do I restart training?

This depends very much on the individual dog. It can be as short a time as an hour or as long as the next day. It is important, however, not to leave too long a gap between training sessions.

What happens in the new session?

The new session is started with the same level of noise but this is soon increased slightly, bearing in mind that it is important not to go beyond the point when your dog may notice the sound and react. If this happens it is important to go back several steps and start with the noise at a much lower volume.

Keep repeating the process, increasing the volume only slightly each time.

What should I expect?

It is important not to expect too much, too soon. As a general rule you should not try to do more than three or four sessions in a block.

How long will this training program take?

You have to accept from the outset that the program will take days if not weeks or even months but eventually your dog should remain relaxed at full intensity noises. Once you have reached this point it is important to reinforce the good response on an occasional basis.

How often do I have to do this revision program?

Initially it has to be quite frequently but with time this can be less often. Reinforcements should be done shortly before the festive season. Do not expect your dog to remember everything until the next big party!

What should I do if I don't appear to be making any progress?

If you seem to be having any problems, consult your veterinarian for further advice or help. Sometimes sound sensitivity may be associated with both medical and more general psychological problems.

What happens if I haven't managed to get my dog trained in time?

This is not an uncommon problem and we have prepared a fact sheet for just such a situation. Drugs may be an option to help the dog improve more quickly or to help the dog better handle fireworks and thunderstorm events that arise before the program has been successfully completed.