

Dog is Frightened by Thunderstorms

Desensitization with thunderstorm CDs/DVDs helps dog overcome fear of thunderstorms.

By September Morn

Q: My dog gets really nervous and jumpy when it rains or there is thunder and lightning. I have given him medication for this, but it only partially works and makes him too drowsy. How can I train him to not be afraid of these loud noises?

A: Many dogs are scared of thunder and lightning and may be afraid of rain because of the scary booms and flashes associated with it. Some dogs become anxious when they feel a storm approaching and will pant, pace, whine, or head for their favorite 'storm shelter' such as a crate, the bathtub, or under a corner table.

The sounds of rain and thunder are only part of what triggers your dog's anxiety, but they're also the parts that can be best controlled. Purchase a DVD recording of thunder and rain combined with soothing instrumental music. These DVDs can be found in the New Age section of music stores. Recordings with just the sound of thunderstorms are also available, but for training purposes, it's more useful to have them paired with relaxing music.

To desensitize your dog to storm sounds start by playing the recording very quietly. Dogs are much more sensitive to sound than humans, so in the beginning, play it so softly you can barely hear it.

As the recording plays, casually attend to normal business around your home, ignoring the sounds playing in the background. Check on your dog every minute to five minutes, and casually give her a treat she normally likes very much.

If you begin noticing any signs of anxiety, don't apologize or commiserate. Just lower the volume, then turn it off. Wait a few minutes before turning it back on. Leave it on for 10 seconds, then off for 10 seconds. Repeat this a few times and end the process with the sound off. Let your dog see that you can control the sounds, but not because you notice her anxiety. Do everything very casually. Stay relaxed, even somewhat bored, by the sounds. When your dog is no longer showing signs of anxiety at the softest level, turn it off and then back on, this time increasing the volume slightly. Occasionally give her mild positive attention and great treats.

Gradually increase the volume one increment at a time, continuing to appear unaffected. After one minute, turn it up even higher, then off, working up to the volume of a real storm. Your dog will see your casual attitude about controlling the volume and realize how unafraid and unaffected you are by the sounds. When your dog is able to stay calm, play it at varying volumes during real storms. If she still wants to hide, let her, but remain casual as you did during the training. Your dog will eventually connect the recording with the nice things she received during her training and realize thunder and rain sounds won't hurt her. Then, even though she might still consider loud storms unpleasant, she won't be as scared.

If possible, start the desensitizing process during non-stormy seasons so you can work on it ahead of time and let your dog build her tolerance to the storm sounds gradually. If you must start the process during storm season, plan the sessions during pleasant weather, in between storms, when your dog is more relaxed.