

Dogs Afraid of Thunder

A step-by-step guide to desensitize your storm-scared dog.

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Transforming a thunderstorm-phobic dog into one that can snooze — or, at least stay calm — during a storm takes patience, consistency, and desensitization. Owners can't control Mother Nature, but they can take steps to ease their dogs' fear during storms.

"Unfortunately, there is no single solution, no magic pill, to cure thunderstorm phobia," says Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, professor and director of the Behavior Clinic at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine. He often prescribes a comprehensive plan that includes behavior modification, desensitization techniques, and, if necessary, anti-anxiety or antidepressant medications.

He recommends these behavior-modification strategies: Exercise your dog a couple hours before a storm is expected to arrive.

Don't leave your dog in the yard. The storm might cause it to dig or jump over your fence to escape, risking injury.

Make sure the dog door is locked to prevent your dog from bolting outside in a panic.

Enhance the appeal of a safe room your dog selects by putting a favorite toy or one of your un-washed T-shirts there for comfort.

Muffle the storm's sounds by turning on the air conditioner, television, or radio. Close window blinds to block out lightning.

Distract your dog with a chew toy stuffed with peanut butter or treats. Or engage it in a favorite indoor game like hide and seek or fetch during a storm. This form of counter-conditioning instills in a dog that good things like fetch can occur during a storm and that it is safe.

Desensitization requires time and plenty of patience and doesn't come with any guarantees. It works best on puppies or on dogs that haven't developed full-blown fears of storms. "Gradually introduce all types of sounds, first low in volume and then steadily increasing in sound, to help dogs get used to them and develop confidence," Dodman says.

Consider using tapes of thunderstorms and other loud noises. Put your dog in a quiet room of the house. Turn on the tape at the lowest volume and engage in normal activities with it. The tape acts like background noise. Gradually increase the volume.