



THUNDERSTORM PHOBIA

A phobia is an all or nothing abnormal response resulting in extremely fearful behaviours (catatonic or paralysed by fright; or panic). An immediate, excessive anxiety response. Dogs who are afraid of thunderstorms may be reacting to the sound of the thunder, the flashes of lightning, the wind or the smell of ozone which is produced by lightning. This type of behaviour is not your fault. It is not the dog's fault.

PROBLEMS LIKE THIS ARE CAUSED BY A CHEMICAL IMBALANCE IN THE BRAIN.

Fear of thunderstorms is common in dogs. 5-10% of dogs may suffer. The typical response is a severe panic attack with trembling, shaking, salivation, inappropriate defaecation or urination, trying to hide, trying to escape from the back yard, trying to get into the house, trying to be near the owners. The resulting manic behaviour may lead to severe injury as the dog is so panicked that it fails to recognise pain or danger to itself (such as an approaching car).

At this point the only thing the dog recognises is the "danger" of the storm.

Attempting to calm or reprimand the dog will have no effect. The dog is incapable of responding. In fact if you attempt to calm the dog you only succeed in assuring him that this is the way you want him to behave.

40% of all dogs with thunderstorm phobia also suffer from separation anxiety.

Clearly it may be difficult to know if your dog suffers from separation anxiety as you may not be there when it happens. These dogs destroy objects, urinate, defaecate, salivate, overgroom or chew themselves, pace, withdraw or bark when left alone. This may include simply being unable to gain access to your presence. In other words, the dog may be outside and you are inside.



Symptoms may be severe and obvious, but also may be quite subtle, such as looking anxious when you pick up the car keys, being excited when you arrive home or having a large drink when you arrive home (because he was too nervous to drink while you were out). The distress may occur when the dog is alone or when the dog does not have access to its favourite person, even though there is someone else there.

If your dog suffers from separation anxiety as well as thunderstorm phobia, both conditions need to be treated. Even for the dog who does not suffer from separation anxiety, training him to be more confident in himself will help in the treatment of thunderstorm phobia.

Behavioural problems need to be attacked from several different angles. Before we go on to ATTEMPT to HELP your dog, understand the following:

1. There is no one single treatment. Sedatives may help, behavioural training exercises may help, anti-psychotics may help. But any one of these used alone will not help.
2. There is no CURE. Treatment may well be a permanent thing.
3. Every dog is different and will be helped by a different group of treatments.
4. There is no such thing as a "sure fire cure". Success rates in the programme outlined are high but not 100%. **SOME DOGS WILL MAKE LITTLE IMPROVEMENT NO MATTER WHAT WE DO.**



TREATING THUNDERSTORM PHOBIA

1. PROVIDE A SAFE PLACE

Dogs in the wild sleep in a den. This is their "safe place". SOME dogs will readily enter a crate or den or cage and find great security there. If the dog will not readily enter the den, do not force it. A den needs to be safe. Provide a blanket, water, toys and a biscuit. Remove chains, leads or collars. Anything that could be destroyed during a panic attack should be removed. Leave a radio or television on if you are going out. The room or den should be brightly lit and temperature controlled. Use the den as a safe place to eat, sleep or play quietly so that when it is required for use during a thunderstorm, the dog already understands that this is a place of safety. NEVER use the den as punishment.

2. TEACH THE DOG TO DEFER TO YOU

By acknowledging the dog (eg: just looking at the dog) when it displays anxious behaviour, you are rewarding the dog and so encouraging the behaviour. Therefore teach the dog to defer to you. Teach the dog to sit quietly and happily, stay and look at you before any attention is given. This includes sitting for food, treats, love, grooming, entry or exit from house, putting on a lead or collar, playing games, being invited onto the lounge or bed, playing with toys, giving a tablet, removing a flea or ANYTHING THE DOG WANTS. The dog need only sit or lie quietly, look at you and wait for your cue. THE VALUE OF DOING THIS IS INESTIMABLE as the dog learns to become less anxious, more relaxed.



3. TEACH THE DOG TO RELAX WHEN ALONE

Start by teaching the dog to sit, stay and RELAX. Give a treat. Then take a small step away, return praise and treat for the correct behaviour. Gradually teach the dog to sit, stay and relax after you have left the room, while you pick up car keys, while you jump up and down, clap your hands etc. The keys to success are (1) Go slowly (2) Learn the dog's relaxed behaviours and reward these. (3) Do not lose your temper and punish the dog (4) Tell the dog he is good when he is, even if it means non-stop talking. Thus when the dog displays anxious behaviours, the removal of the verbal praise acts as a correction of the wrong behaviour. Repeat this training in each room of the house, with each member of the household and in the back yard. Then gradually leave the dog alone for longer periods of time. Until the dog is ready it is best simply not to leave it alone. If possible leave with a "dog sitter".

This technique is explained in minute detail in the accompanying sheet.

This training is specifically for separation anxiety, but still is of great help to dogs with thunderstorm phobia and no separation anxiety.

4. SOME DOGS LIKE TO SEE OUT

If the den provides a view of the outside world, the separation anxious dog may feel more comfortable, thus helping it to control its thunderstorm fear. Other dogs will be frightened by the sight of lightning. Dogs who panic when left in a den may also panic in an outside run. Dogs with thunderstorm phobias should not be left in an outside run if they cannot be rescued in the event of a thunderstorm.



5. MAKE YOUR DEPARTURE EASY

The dog with thunderstorm phobia may very well suffer from undiagnosed separation anxiety. Therefore when you leave the house, make the dog as relaxed as possible. The dog will pick up certain cues that you are leaving, so learn what these are and work it to your advantage. These cues may be picking up car keys, putting on work clothes, make-up, a certain pair of shoes, getting out of bed early or just your own more anxious body language. So on the weekend put on those work clothes or shoes, grab the car keys and sit down and read the paper, or make dinner. Also start doing some "weekend" activities on weekdays, eg: have a full breakfast, play a certain piece of music, play with the dog.

What often happens is that you leave and the dog says, "Oh no, they've gone, something bad is going to happen." He then becomes anxious, some dogs only slightly, others severely. When something bad does happen, like a thunderstorm, the dog then says, "Ah, I knew this would happen and I'm all ready to crack." The dog's fears become a self fulfilling prophesy. Most owners of dogs like this are completely unaware that the dog is so anxious alone, so work on teaching the dog to relax when alone and the battle is half won. It all starts with teaching the dog to relax before you leave.

If you see the dog giving stress cues (pacing, panting, whining, digging, trembling, not eating) DO NOT reassure him that it's all ok. You are only rewarding and reinforcing this behaviour. Instead, before the dog becomes distressed, reward calm behaviour. Talk happily, groom, massage gently. DO NOT fuss over the dog as you leave if it becomes upset, but DO reward calm behaviour as you leave.



6. PUNISHMENT

There is no role for punishment in the treatment of separation anxiety or thunderstorm phobia. Punishing the already anxious dog will make it fearful and more anxious.

7. DESENSITISATION

Buy a tape or cd of a thunderstorm. Don't laugh. This is ESSENTIAL. Play the cd at the lowest volume with the dog sitting nearby. This is where the sitting and relaxation training really comes in. If the dog becomes agitated, ignore him. If the dog is calm and relaxed, reward him with praise or a small piece of food (we use Vets Best Rewards which are freeze dried lamb liver pieces. These are saved for use as a special reward only). The aim is to gradually turn up the volume. If the dog becomes agitated at a higher volume, stop and start again at a lower volume. Always give lots of praise for calm behaviour but no punishment for agitation

8. MEDICATION

Unfortunately, every time the dog has another bad experience with the thunderstorm it strengthens the dog's belief that storms are a threat and may lead to a more severe response next time. Also during a thunderstorm the dog will be totally untrainable. Some dogs will need the assistance of anti-anxiety sedative drugs to ease them through the next few storms. Without this, another bad experience may well undo all the learning you have achieved so far.



For this reason your biggest chance to solve this problem is from April to August when storms are far less likely. Also the extent of the dog's problem is very often such that all the training tips mentioned will be of minimal help without the assistance of another group of medications which work by allowing the dog to be capable of learning. They make the dog trainable.

These drugs are not sedatives (dogs are incapable of learning while sedated).

They simply work by changing the chemical imbalance in your dog's brain

from what it now is back to "normal". Remember that this whole problem

comes about because the affected dog has abnormal brain chemistry; actually a

deficiency of a chemical called serotonin. In the dog with a normal amount of

serotonin, thunderstorm phobia will not normally occur. The dog with

thunderstorm phobia has a deficiency of serotonin. We now have available

drugs to correct this problem. These drugs are not a treatment on their own.

Their effects will be minimal if used without re-training. Therefore treating this

problem is a total package.