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Thunder Dogs

HOW TO HELP DOGS OVERCOME THEIR FEAR OF STORMS

consoling their pet can easily reinforce and condition fear responses in dogs and exacerbate the fearful behavior. While many dogs benefit from human interaction during periods of stress, owners consoling thunder dogs during storms can actually reinforce for them that storms are scary. There are more effective ways to calm your dog down during a storm.

A study conducted at the University of Georgia, Athens found that 93.75 percent (30 out of 32 dogs) with storm phobia showed significant improvement when given medications prescribed by their veterinarian like Xanax, Prozac, or Clomicalm, combined with behavior modification and desensitization.

Here are some environmental modifications:

- Place cotton balls or foam earplugs in your dog's ears to lessen noise
- Place dogs in a dark interior room without windows to help them feel safe (e.g. basement)
- Place a Thundershirt on your dog. This tight-fitting shirt applies gentle pressure to the dog's torso, promoting relaxation.
- Create a hiding place by covering an OPEN crate with thick blankets. DO NOT lock your dog in the crate during the storm.

These are behavior modifications:

- Instead of consoling your dog, ignore the behavior while trying an environmental modification.
- Give your dog food or something safe to chew on as chewing helps relieve stress.

Desensitization techniques:

- Play a recording of a thunderstorm for your dog on sunny days for 10-seconds at a very low volume. If they remain calm, increase the volume and duration slightly each time you play it. Consult your veterinarian to determine duration and volume levels you should use.

With a few modifications and a lot of patience, owners can help their dogs manage their fear of thunderstorms and loud noises, making the summer months more enjoyable and stress-free. 

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IT'S THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT and your dog is whining and pawing at you. *Maybe he needs to go potty*, you think as you let him out. Five minutes later, he's back at your bedside, pawing and whining again. *Maybe he's hungry*, you think as you give him a snack, only to have him return minutes later.

Then, the low rumble of an incoming storm alerts you to the problem—your dog is spooked by the weather. Fearful reactions to storms are so common in the canine population that veterinarians have a term for these patients: Thunder Dogs. Just the sight of darkening clouds, increased humidity, and howling winds are enough to make these dogs anxious.

Fear of thunderstorms affects about 20 percent of dogs in the United States (with most in storm-prone areas like Chicago) and is often associated with other issues such as separation anxiety or noise phobias. The fear can develop slowly or come on suddenly, so all owners need to pay attention to warning signs that their dog is growing fearful of inclement weather. Owners should also watch to see if their dog's fear of thunderstorms generalizes to a fear of loud noises that include

gunshots, fireworks, or anything that goes “bang”.

SIGNS YOUR DOG IS A THUNDER DOG

Typically, dogs hide or sit with their owners until the storm passes, without becoming very upset. Thunder Dogs react differently, and will exhibit these symptoms:

- Paw and whine to wake you up
- Hide under a bed, in a closet, or in a bathtub while trembling and shaking
- Pace excessively, pant, and drool while looking for a hiding place
- Dig at the carpet, scratch doors, chew drywall, or jump through windows in an attempt to escape the storm.
- Urinate/defecate indoors, even if completely housebroken
- Refuse to go outside prior to and during the storm
- If crated, may break their teeth trying to escape the crate during a storm.

HELPING YOUR THUNDER DOG

Naturally, owners want to comfort their dogs when they're distressed—but do so carefully. Comforting behaviors such as holding, petting, or