

Behavior Tips: *Helping dogs who fear noise*

Fear of noises is extremely stressful for afflicted dogs and the people who love them. Dogs who react negatively to noise are commonly described as being noise sensitive, noise reactive, noise averse, and noise phobic. All these descriptions suggest different severities, although many people use these terms interchangeably. True phobia to noise is often demonstrated by dogs as invariant and extreme avoidance, anxiety or escape but other less extreme signs of fear of noises include urination/defecation, trembling/shaking, panting, salivating (see photo) and vocalization. Most clients observe dogs being distressed by noises such as thunder, fireworks, gun shots and other unpredictable loud events but dogs that fear noise may be affected by any sound they experience and perceive as upsetting. Something as insignificant as an oven beeping can be extremely distressing. Once dogs react to one noise they may generalize to others.

Fear of noises is often considered a normal response by many clients but we are now realising just how important it is that we acknowledge that this is *not* a healthy response. Just like humans that require treatment to help cope with anxieties, it is important to treat dogs who are fearful as soon as the fear becomes apparent.



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It is important to note that there is an association between dogs who have fear of noises and who also express some degree of separation anxiety and other anxiety-related conditions. Separation anxiety occurs when a dog experiences physical or behavioural distress only in

times of an absence of a person and unfortunately, is a commonly misunderstood and misused term in the dog community. Signs of separation anxiety are similar to signs observed with fear of noises and include: vocalization, trembling, panting, urination/defecation, salivation, destruction and escape behaviours. Without treatment, it is suspected that fear associated with noise may trigger or worsen other conditions causing deleterious effects in the dog's life.

For dogs who are fearful of predictable noises such as storms and fireworks, it can be helpful to provide them with a "safe space" where they can retreat. Rooms without windows or skylights are preferred but if the only choice you have is a room with windows then pulling the curtains closed may help. For dogs who love their crates/kennels these may be great "safe rooms", especially if covered with a blanket, but crates are only suitable for dogs who know and love them. Likewise, secure rooms should be those where the dog is comfortable. Room and kennel doors can be left unlocked so dogs don't feel confined and can leave when ready.

You can prepare food toys ahead of time (Kongs or lickmats), and leave on a low radio or TV. Some dogs respond well to anxiety vests, often known as "Thunder shirts". These are specially designed shirts that apply gentle calming pressure that resemble a hug. These shirts, which may work best for mild cases, must be well fitted and should not compromise breathing or blood flow or allow the dog to hang on anything.

Client behaviour matters. Clients need to be calm and reassuring. A truly panicked dog is unlikely to benefit simply from reassurance

but clients should still sit with them. Some dogs benefit from clients holding or leaning on them firmly.

If clients are anxious, dogs may be more anxious since they can synchronize their behaviours with ours. And simply telling a distressed dog 'it's okay' doesn't help because the dog knows it's not okay. If dogs seek attention when they are distressed, try to provide attention that lowers – not elevates – their fear and reaction level. If you watch, you can tell.



Dog with a Thundershirt

The best thing you can do for your dog if you suspect they are fearful of noises is to visit your veterinarian for a behaviour-focused appointment. These appointments are longer than regular appointments and will likely involve many questions about your dog's day to day life, routine, interactions with people and other dogs and his/hers overall behavioural state. Bring a video of the concerning behaviours with you. The sooner behavioural concerns are addressed, the better the outcome is likely to be. In fact, by taking your dog to the vet every 4-6 months (even if they don't show any signs of anxiety!), your veterinarian can screen for anxiety and fear-based disorders throughout life allowing early treatment and the best results. Treatment of fears generally involved medication to relieve the anxiety and to help dogs learn new behaviours and behaviour modification.

There are a variety of medications may help your dog cope with their fear of noises. These may include anti-anxiety medications that are given a few hours before an expected noise event such as New Year's Eve fireworks, or an approaching thunderstorm, medications that may be used interventionally to stop a fearful reaction that is occurring, or medications may be daily and designed to address underlying anxiety. Daily medications are especially helpful if your dog has another underlying condition, like separation anxiety. Modern medications are designed to not drug or sedate dogs, and instead, allow dogs to be all that they can be. Finally, if needed, you may be referred to a specialist in behavioural medicine.

Some breeds and lines of dogs are more at risk for a heritable version of fear of noises. Breeders should be aware of the risk for their dogs, tell prospective owners about them and use breeding strategies designed to decrease the frequency of the condition.

Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upe.ca).