

Astrophobia, otherwise known as a intense fear of Thunderstorms, in Dogs & Cats

It seems that every time this season rolls around, I find more of my clients with pets who have very strong reactions to thunderstorms. For a few examples, there is one greyhound whose nails all click on the wood floor when she's not moving, she just shakes so hard. Another greyhound I know gets wild-eyed and tries to dig out of the house through the carpet. I know a Westie who shakes and shivers anytime a storm is approaching, and a mixed-breed large dog who gets so frightened she won't go outside, FOR HOURS.

These are only a few examples, and they break my heart. So, I've done some research on this subject and would like to share my discoveries with you. First, I assumed that a dog who is fearful of thunder, would also be afraid of fireworks, but I've found the two phobias aren't related and are entirely different. Neither of my dogs are afraid of thunder, but Tom is very fearful of fireworks, for example. When you consider that thunderstorms also bring wind, rain, lightening, hail, darkness and a change in barometric pressure it's easier to understand the difference.

Due to these factors, dogs who are sensitive to these signs can be terrified before a storm even hits because they smell & sense it approaching. Some of the indications that your pet suffers from this phobia is to find them hiding, panting, drooling, barking or whining, trembling, pacing, destructive behavior like tearing down curtains or clawing at carpets and aggression. Two breeds seem to be more prevalent in this behavior, hounds & herding dogs.

And it seems to be that this condition worsens over time, so an older dog gets even more stressed than when it was younger.

There are a few things a pet owner can do to help their pet "weather the storms", some are physical and some are therapeutic such as herbs or medications. The first one is to offer

your pet a safe haven to take shelter in, their crate for instance, or a basement without windows. It's important the space be as quiet as possible, and doesn't allow the flashes of lightening to be seen. Some pets prefer a space like a bathroom or even bathtub! They lie down and it cuts down on the static electricity they feel in the air. Try playing music in that space to soothe your pet, check out MusicMyPet.com or PetMusic.com.

Another method to treat phobias is called "desensitization". This includes introducing your pet to the offending sound or smell gradually. For instance, playing the sounds of a thunderstorm first very softly and increasing the sound over time. Thunderstorm phobia is an exceptionally difficult fear to deal with, due to the many factors involved in the storm, as mentioned above. The smell & atmospheric changes can't be duplicated. In addition, you might get your pet to understand in they are safe in the kitchen, but you'll need to start over in the living room.

There are many products on the market that seem to help, most are snug-fitting with anti-static lining. The Thundershirt is one such item, the Anxiety-wrap and the Storm Defender are 2 others. Comfort Zone Dog-appeasing Pheromone diffuser is a product that emits a natural chemical called pheromones into the air, it is the same essence that dogs & cats receive from each other through the skin and their glands. Once sensed, it can help your pet feel secure & comfortable and less likely to be destructive & fearful. Premier makes a product called a "Calming Cap", which works in a way similar to blinders on a horse. Massage might also help your pet relax.

As for herbal and/or natural remedies, there are many to choose from, here is a listing:

- Bach flower remedies 1) Rescue Remedy 2) Rock Rose 3) Mimulus www.bachflower.com
- Herbsmith Calm Shen <http://www.herbsmithinc.com>
- Hyland's Calms Forte <http://www.hylands.com>

- Spirit Essence Storm Soother <http://www.abesmarket.com>
- OptiBalance Fear & Phobias Formula <http://optibalancepet.com>
- Green Hope Essences Anxiety Formula <http://www.greenhopeessences.com>
- Vetri-science Composure for Stress-related events (made in normal & mini sizes) -
http://www.vetriscience.com/index.php?l=product_detail&p=900780060

Other Resources include:

- Comfort Zone Dog-appeasing Pheromone diffuser <http://www.petcomfortzone.com>
- Anxiety Wrap <http://www.anxietywrap.com>
- Calming Cap <http://www.premier.com>
- Thunderstorm DVDs at <http://www.legacycanine.com/store/index.html>
- Ttouch <http://www.ttouch.com> TTouch can help you understand and influence your animal with your heart and hands in a way that develops trust, creates a harmonious relationship, and changes unwanted behavior.
- "Help for Your Fearful Dog" book at <http://www.phantompub.com>

Hope that this article can bring some relief & comfort to my darling 4-legged clients!! Patti