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Desensitizing can be effective remedy for thunder fear

Dear Gus,

Our 7-year-old dog has suddenly become afraid of thunder. When she hears thunder she begins to pace and will actually shake with fear. We are very concerned about leaving her alone when there is a possibility of a thunderstorm. – How can we eliminate this problem?

Linda A., Woodbridge

Dear Linda,

Since your dog lived 7 years without this fear, this problem is most likely some sort of associative problem. In other words, something very frightening and traumatic happened to her during a thunderstorm, and she now associates the thunderstorm with this event. I sometimes see this fear develop when a dog has been in close proximity to fireworks being set off as well.

The first step is to be sure that there is not a physical cause for her behavior. If she has had any ear infections, she may have ear pain caused by the changes in air pressure associated with storms in general. Once a physical cause is ruled out, the solution will involve desensitizing her to the sound of thunder. If this is not effective, your veterinarian can, as a last resort, prescribe a mild sedative which you can give her when a storm approaches.

One thing to avoid is making "an event" out of an approaching storm. If you become anxious about the storm, worrying about its effect on her, she will sense this and become more fearful and anxious. As you desensitize her to the thunder, you want to use your obedience training to show her that you, as the pack leader, are not afraid. This is a situation where you want her to begin associating thunder with positive, rather than negative events, so be sure not to correct her if she becomes anxious. Instead, use praise, reassurance and distraction to help her remain calm.

You can purchase a tape or CD of storm related sounds, and start by playing these softly while your dog is relaxed. As she remains calm, give her praise and a reward, be it a favorite toy to play with or a favored treat. Over a number of sessions, increase the volume of the recording, always rewarding her for remaining calm. If she shows any sign of anxiety, you can try an immediate distraction but if that is not effective, lower the volume of the sound until she is again relaxed. After a number of sessions, she should be associating the thunder with pleasant times, and her anxiety should decrease.

I hope this helps.

Gus

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