

## **FULL OF SOUND AND FURY - THUNDERPHOBIA**

**© 1996-2004 Lee Livingood. All rights reserved. Materials may not be copied, reproduced, distributed, shared, or otherwise used without the express written consent of the author.**

It's the height of the summer storm season and your phone is ringing off the hook. It's another call from another adopter of a thunderphobic hound. And it leaves you feeling helpless.

Unfortunately, fear of thunderstorms is one of the most difficult fear-related behaviors to resolve. The two primary components of a successful counterconditioning and desensitization program--preventing exposure to the fear and identifying and independently treating each and every trigger--is nearly impossible to achieve with the thunderstorm phobic dog.

For some dogs, the trigger is the sound of the thunder and nothing more. These dogs are more treatable, particularly if they live in areas that have long, thunderstorm-free seasons.

However, many dogs are reacting to multiple and overlapping triggers--changes in the barometer, winds, rain, static in the air, ionic changes, and perhaps things our human senses are not aware of. These triggers can be difficult, if not impossible, to control or replicate with any authenticity.

More importantly, fearful dogs often generalize these fears to non-storm related events--a low flying jet on a cloudy day, for instance. How do you control exposure to that? Since the chances of fixing this problem at this time of year aren't good, let's focus on what advice you can give your adopters that may help them and their hounds survive the storm season.

### **Provide comfort**

Pay attention to where your dog goes for comfort during a storm, then provide a soft place for her there. Chances are it will be a dark place or a place in the center of the house where the sounds and flashes aren't as noticeable. Many dogs go to a downstairs family room, dark closet, a crate, the bathroom, or the bathtub.

During the storm season, plug in a Comfort Zone DAP system. Use one for every 500 square feet of living space (the areas where you and your hound spend your time). And don't skimp by thinking you can buy one and move it around.

Supplement your hound's diet with 3mg of melatonin each day during the storm season. Give it on an empty stomach. If you can't do that, then give it only with a non-protein source food. You can safely give your greyhound a second 3mg tablet about 40 minutes before a storm arrives.

### **Tune in**

Invest in a good weather radio with a SAME alert system so you are always aware of when storms are brewing.

### **Turn on**

Turn on some soothing music or a TV to mask the noises a bit until the storm is over.

### **Don't fence me in**

Don't close her in her crate or confine her to a small space. Even if she prefers her crate or a small space, don't lock her in. She may panic and seriously injure herself if she tries to escape.

### **Cut the static**

Reduce the static. Rub her coat with a fabric softener dryer sheet to decrease the static—a common result of thunderstorms and one that dogs learn to associate with the storms.

If your dog loves to ride in the car, try letting her ride out the storm in the car. This not only helps dissipate the static, but you can actually drive her away from the worst of the storm. If the storm is too heavy to make driving safe, sit with her in the car in the garage. She won't be able to see the lightning flashes and the thunder claps will be more muted.

**Batten own the hatches**

Keep windows covered so she can't see out. Keep her away from windows and keep all doors and outside gates closed so your dog cannot escape. Remember flight is a common response to fear. Prevent her from getting near glass doors or windows if she is panicky – some dogs will break through in an attempt to run from the storm.

Keep two collars on her – including one with her identification riveted to or woven into her collar – in case she slips on collar and bolts while her rescuer has a collar off trying to read your contact info.

Whatever safe place she chooses, be sure she has access to it when you are not at home.

**Don't coddle her**

Simple reassurance can help some dogs, but keep it short and keep it simple. If it isn't working, stop it. Any attention you pay to her fearful behavior is likely to reinforce her belief that something bad is happening. You don't need to ignore *her* – just her fearful behavior. If she comes to you, let her share your company, but don't constantly stroke or baby her.

**Try a safety cue**

If her fear is mild, provide a safety cue such as a special chewie, a great stuffed frozen Kong, or new squeaky toy that will divert her attention. Provide this at the first sign of a storm and remove it as soon as the storm has passed.

**Don't worry, be happy**

Act happy. Be happy. She'll be watching you for clues about how to respond. So keep your own reactions calm and happy. Act as though *absolutely nothing* unusual is going on. If you are also afraid of storms, you have to hone your acting skills.

**Use medicinal support**

Every exposure to storms intensifies her response, increases the probability that more triggers will be added and that the fears will be generalized to non-storm related events. This makes a behavioral modification program less likely to be effective. Medication can help keep the problem from worsening or slow its progress. Even if the results aren't evident to you, it's worth it if it reduces the amount of panic your dog is experiencing.

**Full of sound and fury**

While these things will not fix a thunderphobic dog, they may help make the storm season more bearable and perhaps keep her fears from worsening. If you have a few months or so before the next storm season sets in, begin to work on a carefully prepared behavioral program well in advance of the next storm season. Terry Ryan has an excellent series of CDs, *Sound Sensibilities*, for this purpose. You can order the thunderstorm CD from Terry's website <http://www.legacycanine.com>, or from [www.dogwise.com](http://www.dogwise.com)