

Treating Thunderstorm Phobia

by Dr. Marie Haynes of Ask A Vet Question

To view the entire article, including a list of drugs commonly used to treat thunderstorm phobias visit <http://www.askavetquestion.com/thunderstorms.php>

Thunderstorm Desensitization Program:

(program created by Dr. Marie of <http://www.askavetquestion.com>)

The idea is that you play simulated thunderstorm sounds at a very low volume and teach the dog to enjoy this. (I'll explain how later on). Then, you gradually increase the volume of the recording until the dog can be listening to very loud thunderstorms and not be anxious.

Of course though, playing thunderstorm sounds does not completely simulate a storm as there is no change in atmospheric pressure. But, if you take the steps outlined below, it really should help.

It is best to do this over a period of a week or two. Ideally it would be best to do this training when there are no thunderstorms in the forecast. If a loud thunderstorm happens in the middle of this training period it may set us back a little. It is a good idea to ask your vet for a prescription of either Trazadone or Alprazolam to use on the days when there is a thunderstorm.

1. Designate a "safe" place for your dog.

This could be a bedroom, a bathroom, the basement or even the downstairs. Our first goal is to teach the dog that this place is AWESOME. Don't even think of playing the thunderstorm sounds until we have established that this place is great. It may take a few days to do this.

2. Think of a name for your dog's safe place.

You can call it whatever you want, but for now, I'll call it - "your room". So, grab a handful of treats and say to your dog, "Hey! Let's go to your room!" Then, walk into the room and give the dog a few treats.

Do this several times a day for a few days. Get really excited about it! Out of the blue just say, "HEY! Let's go to YOUR ROOM!", and then go with your dog to the safe place and give him treats.

3. Teach your dog to be calm in the safe place.

After you have done this for two to three days, the next step is to teach your dog to be calm and relaxed in his safe place. So, say to him, "Let's go to your room!" Go to the safe place but don't give him any treats. Instead tell him to lie down and then, once he has done that give him treats.

Do this several times a day. However, each time you do it, wait a little bit longer before he gets his treats. The idea is to teach him that he needs to go to his safe place, lie down and be quiet and then he'll get a treat.

Work up to him lying in his safe place for 5 minutes before he gets his treat. Once you have this accomplished then move on to step 4. Again, this may take a few days, so be patient! It's really important not to rush things!

4. Introducing some thunderstorm noise.

In this step, we are going to start playing some thunderstorm noises. You can buy CDs online that play thunderstorm sounds, but I've found some online that you can use for free. Ideally it is best to have these sounds playing out of a good quality stereo (as opposed to your computer speakers.)

(Thank you to the Free Sound Project for supplying these tracks!)

[Thunderstorm](#) – by martin lightning

[Ohio Storm](#) – by Corsica_S

[Thunderstorm](#) – by inchadney

[Thunderstorm](#) in Berlin – by faruku

Choose one of the above sounds. The first one is a good one to start with. It's good to mix up which sound you play on a given day so that your dog doesn't get accustomed to just one track. Have your dog in the room with you and start playing the thunderstorm track on REALLY low volume. Ideally it's best if you can start the track by using a remote so that your dog doesn't know that you are doing it, but this isn't mandatory.

Watch for signs that your dog is taking note of the sound – ears go up, starts to tremble, looks anxious. The moment you see anything like that then say "Let's go to YOUR ROOM!" and go to the safe place, tell him to lie down and give him treats.

If your dog is super anxious then wait a day before you try this again and try it with the recording at an even lower level.

Later on in the day, repeat this process using the same volume level. We want to make it so that the dog gets excited when he hears thunder because he knows he gets to go to his room and get treats!

5. Increasing the intensity

Once you feel that your dog is enjoying going to his room when the recording is on, then it's time to try the recording at a slightly higher volume. Over the next few days, several times a day we're going to repeat this process. **It is really important that we don't go too fast! If you think your dog is getting anxious then take it down a notch and try again the next day.**

Eventually we should get to the point where we can have the recording blaring at full volume and the dog is happily sitting in his safe place eating treats. Once we get to this point, if you want to you can start to lessen the number of treats and the frequency at which he gets them.

Important: If your dog is anxious during this process and reducing the volume is not working, then you should highly consider speaking to your veterinarian about using an anti-anxiety medication during the thunderstorm season.

Also: If you are using a lot of treats during this time period, you may want to decrease the amount of food your dog is getting so that he doesn't gain weight!

Note! This page is for information only and not meant to diagnose or treat your pet. If you have concerns about your pet's issues with thunderstorm anxiety the best thing you can do is to call your veterinarian!

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