

Is your dog scared of fireworks?

Noise sensitivity is a problem commonly seen by vets and behaviour counsellors and can be very distressing for both dogs and their owners. A dog suffering from a noise sensitivity will begin to display certain behaviours when it hears particular sounds such as fireworks, thunder or gunshots. The severity of the problem varies greatly from mild anxiety to true phobia where the dog can exhibit signs of extreme fear and may even injure itself or those around them.

A dog that is suffering from noise sensitivity will display one or some of the following signs:

- Panting and drooling
- Pacing
- Shaking
- Whining or barking
- Hiding
- Destruction
- Passing urine or faeces

These are ways dogs show distress and ways of coping with the fear they are feeling. They often either try to hide away or escape, which can lead to injury or destruction. What normally happens in these dogs is that the reaction starts fairly mild and then as they experience more noises over months or years the problem develops and the dog's reaction becomes more intense.

It is a natural reaction to comfort your dog when it is scared but by doing so the fearful response is encouraged and will therefore continue or get worse. The best thing an owner can do is to ignore fearful behaviour and praise their dog if and when they start to relax. It is advisable to start making preparations at least two weeks before you anticipate fireworks starting. Here are some tips to help you deal with your dog during the firework season:

1. DAP (Dog Appeasing Pheromone). This is a product that contains a chemical that replicates a pheromone (chemical message produced by the body) that is normally released by a bitch when she is feeding her puppies. The purpose of this pheromone is to induce a calm and relaxed feeling in dogs. This product is widely used to aid in the treatment of anxiety and stress-related conditions. It is available in either a spray, a plug-diffuser or a collar. Advice should be sought about which of these will be most suitable for your dog. The diffuser must be fitted two weeks before the start of fireworks.
2. Create a den for your dog where they can take refuge when they are scared. This may be an indoor crate or simply a space where the dog has a tendency to go already. Ideally it should be an area in the centre of the house to make it as sound proof as possible e.g. under the stairs. Make it as inviting as possible by putting their favourite bedding, toys etc in there and you can even feed them there to build a positive association with it. You can also try putting in an item of your clothing that you have worn but not washed. They will be comforted by your smell. If using a crate, the door must never be closed during the fireworks. When a dog is in a phobic state they are likely to injure themselves if they are trying to escape. It is advisable to cover it with a blanket to block out the light and increase the feeling of security. The den should be made as far in advance as possible to allow the dog time to build positive associations with it and make it more likely to use it as a refuge.
3. Feed your dog a starchy meal an hour before a firework display is scheduled. This can be well-cooked rice or pasta or boiled potatoes, and will help make them sleepy and hopefully less reactive.
4. Block out the noise by keeping doors and windows closed and curtains drawn. You could also try having the TV or radio a bit louder to try and cover some of the noises.
5. Medication is sometimes indicated in dogs displaying a severe reaction. It is not advisable to use sedatives as these simply make the dog unable to carry out the coping behaviours it performs when it is fearful. A sedative will not reduce fear it just makes the dog unable to move, which can actually make it a more terrifying experience. Other drugs such as Valium, work by reducing anxiety and making the dog less stressed.

These measures should help make the firework experience less stressful for you and your dog. There are ways of treating noise phobia so if you wish to discuss your dog's behaviour in more detail please ask to speak to Sarah Spark.