

FEAR OF THUNDERSTORMS

Many dogs react to the far distant rumblings of a thunderstorm and hide long before people are even aware there is a storm approaching. The sound of thunder can send some dogs into a complete panic often causing them to jump fences or break down doors. There is some debate as to whether or not this is a conditioned response or a sensitivity to the increased electrical impulses in the air during a storm. If a dog is responding with fear to the noises of a thunderstorm, the dog can be desensitized to the storm. The following are steps towards desensitization.

1. Teach the dog to sit and stay prior to working on desensitization.
2. Get a recording of a thunderstorm. Terry Ryan has several CDs available to use for desensitization with a variety of sounds -- www.dogwise.com, or make one the next time there is a storm.
3. Play the recording very quiet at first and repeat the sit and stay exercises using food as a reward and distraction. Watch the dog for any signs of stress and lower the volume if stress is apparent.
4. Gradually increase the loudness of the recording and reinforce the dog for any calm behavior. If the dog shows any signs of stress, do not reward the dog, but lower the volume and try again.
5. The goal is to be able to leave the recording on and leave the room.
6. Try to be around for the next real thunderstorm to assess if the desensitization process is working. Be sure to use the steps above during any actual storm to remind the dog of the behavior you want.
7. If the dog responds well to training with the CD but still gets upset during the real thing, the dog may be responding to the electrical activity in the atmosphere. Allow the dog to go to a comfortable place in the house and leave them alone. Talking softly, petting, or comfort of any type towards a dog who is acting fearful is only rewarding that behavior. Ignore any fearful behavior and reward any calm behavior.