

Helping Dogs with Fireworks Fear

If fireworks-phobic dogs had calendars, they'd mark May 24 and July 1 as the worst days of the year. The fear, anxiety and stress induced by the sound, the sight, and even the smell of fireworks can range from moderate to extreme. All it can take is one exposure to the celebratory explosives to frighten a dog, but as they go through subsequent exposures, their fear can become stronger. Instead of habituating to the experience, they sensitize to it. And that means, on top of being freaked out by fireworks, they may also react fearfully to other sounds and actions that are occurring at the same time. A dog that's frightened of fireworks may whine, pant, tremble, bark and howl; they may try to bolt or hide; they may refuse to eat or take treats. For some, the trauma lingers after the event is over, with skittish behaviour that continues the day after or longer. Who wants a dog to suffer like that? Here's what we can do to ease and hopefully reduce fireworks fear.



Preparing for a fireworks event

Well ahead of firecracker night, you can take some measures to prepare your dog:

Create a sanctuary space: If they don't already have a safe space of their own, start getting them used to one. If your dog is crate trained, make sure the crate is located away from windows and in an inner room, where they can't see the flashes and the noise will be more muffled. Some people like using the basement for a sanctuary space, as it's more soundproof. Those who live in apartments or condos without a spare room can set up a cozy closet or use the bathroom.

Build confidence and coping skills: You might want to train your dog to get absorbed in shaping exercises, such as Karen Pryor's "101 Things to Do with a Box," in which the dog is reinforced for doing multiple activities with a cardboard box. Creating a positive association with this fun game well ahead of the fireworks event may enable the dog to become engaged in it even as the fireworks are popping. Same with a scavenger hunt, in which tasty treats are hidden around a room and the dog needs to nose them out.

Desensitize and counter-condition: By playing a recording of fireworks explosions at a very low level, a level so low that the dog stays below threshold, showing no signs of anxiety or fear, you can start to desensitize them to the scary sounds. As long as they are under threshold, you can



pair the experience of listening to the recording with very high-value treats in a process called counter-conditioning, in which we change the dog's negative feelings to positive ones. If you're successful at keeping them stress-free at a very low volume, increase the sound incrementally, always ensuring the dog is under threshold.

Consider fear-free medicinal treatment: If your dog's fireworks fear is high, talk to a vet about prescribing a single-event anti-anxiety medication, which is given ahead of the noisy celebrations, or possibly longer-term anxiolytics. Another option for mild phobias is a synthetic canine pheromone therapy thought to have a calming effect on dogs by diffusing or spraying the scent in their sanctuary space. There is some debate as to whether or not Adaptil works¹, but some owners claim that it has had a profound effect on reducing their dog's fear.

On the day/evening of the event

Use equipment for safe management: There are always going to be people who set off their fireworks in the middle of the day and you can't prepare for that beyond taking your dog on shorter walks so you'll be close to home if you need to hightail it back. Ensure your dog's collar is properly fitted so they can't pull out of it and for extra nervous dogs, you might want the added security of a body harness, with the leash clipped to both harness and collar.

Implement visual and aural blockers: To block any light flashes from the fireworks, pull curtains and close blinds. Create your own sound to help muffle the fireworks: Try running a white noise machine, which has several settings of soothing sounds, or playing jazz, reggae, or classical music. "Through a Dog's Ear" is a CD compilation of classical recordings specifically created to mellow out anxious canines.

Settle into the sanctuary space ahead of time: Well before the cacophony begins, lead your dog to their sanctuary space and stay with them. Have favourite toys and long-lasting treats such as stuffed frozen Kongs or treat-dispensing toys on hand to offer as a distraction, though a very fearful dog will likely not be able to eat.

Offer comfort and playful support: If you feel tense about the impending fireworks, you'll add to your dog's fear. Use a cheerful, matter-of-fact tone before, during and after the event. It's perfectly okay to comfort your dog if they're afraid; speak in a soothing manner and give them steady, slow strokes along their body. You can also "jolly" them, meaning actively play with them, sounding upbeat and happy. Far from reinforcing their fear, this approach can help induce positive feelings and make the next fireworks experience a little more tolerable.

References

¹Frank, D., Beauchamp, G., & Palestrini, C. (2010). Systematic review of the use of pheromones for treatment of undesirable behavior in cats and dogs. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 236(12), 1308-1316.

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