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## Managing Storm Anxiety

-Dr. Jacky May

Do you have a dog with mild to moderate noise anxiety (storms, fireworks)? There are ways to deal with severely phobic dogs but that is not the scope of this article. If they have progressed to full on anxiety attacks and are throwing themselves through walls and doors then you have waited far too late to intervene and a great deal more effort will have to be undertaken than what I describe here.

Fireworks and such are usually more pure noise phobias and many of the techniques recommended here can assist with them as well. Storm anxiety can be more complex as there can be many components to a storm that dogs 'cue' to – thunder is not only noise but vibration, the noise of heavy rain, the darkening of the sky, their people running around looking worried, flashes of light, changes in barometric pressure and humidity, some can even become sensitized to the buildup of electrical charges. Yes, the dog can learn to cue to all of those things and more. **The complex nature of the cues with storms can make treating severe thunderstorm anxieties a complex business (but they usually can be managed, just come by and talk to us).**



The following is a list of the most commonly helpful recommendations. Very often what works will be a combination of some of these methods rather than a single fix all product or method:

### 1) Intervene early

This tends to be true for ALL behavioral problems. Step in and deal with them sooner rather than later. **The time to deal with these issues is long before major destruction and injury is occurring, and well before your patience has run out.** When someone throws their dog or cat up on the exam table and announces they are sick to death of dealing with <whatever>, well the ship has already sailed on our ability to help you.



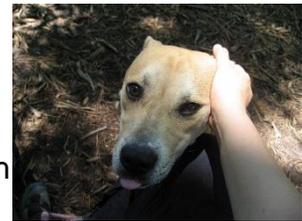
Storm anxiety is known to be a progressive disease. Every subsequent storm can compound the fear and anxiety, and every subsequent storm season can result in the fear getting worse. You also need to be able to recognize the subtle signs of distress in your dog to be able to intervene early. **Some of the more subtle signs may include : hiding, retreating to their crate, moving close to their favorite person, pacing, panting, licking their lips, yawning, drooling, whine/bark, shake/tremble, trying to fit into tight spaces.**

## 2) Reassure the dog

There is a difference between reassuring and coddling. I am not a fan of making a great big production out of 'babying' a dog. A big dramatic production can work against you and may even make the dog worse. However, there is nothing wrong with reassuring the dog that everything is ok.

They will often cue from you anyway, so by all means give them a pet, let them lay close by if they wish, speak more often and in calming way (**yelling "it's ok it's ok it's ok" in a high pitched voice is NOT helpful!** Speak slow and low). Above all, do not act like there is a problem, and instead go about things in as normal and calm a way as possible.

You can even try some specific touch therapy to see if it helps such as [TTouch Ear Work](#) (that link goes to a very detailed pdf file that discusses how to use this calming touch method and has video links as well).



## 3) Let them hide or build them a 'bunker' they have constant access to. If they wish to hide, then let them.



If they want in their crate then allow them inside. Try allowing them into a dark closet or smaller bathroom in which you have placed a bed, food, water, and their favorite toy. Being in a small inner room or closet cuts out the light flashes and muffles a lot of the vibrations and noise associated with it all. Try keeping a **heavy** blanket around and laying it over their crate during storms. Some dogs settle down right away when allowed to hide in their own storm bunker room, don't work against that need for them. If hiding helps consider leaving their 'bunker' available to them all the time so they can get inside when you are away and a storm starts.

Flashing lights can be part of the trigger too. Consider closing the drapes/blinds so the light flashes are not as obvious. If they do not like to hide in their own dark place, then

switch gears and try leaving a light on during the stormy night to help make the flashing light outside less noticeable.

#### 4) Compete with the noise

Try keeping a nice loud shoot 'em up video on hand that the dog does not usually react to, and play it while the storm or fireworks are going on. Turn the radio on and turn it up or use a white noise machine. These tips all work for some dogs and are easy enough to implement when the storm starts.



Another way to go if those do not seem to keep them from getting anxious is to opt for soothing music. A great many people swear by [Through A Dog's Ear](#) which is very specifically designed to induce relaxation. **Relaxation music needs to have been introduced to the dog prior to a storm** so that you can help insure that they do have a relaxation response to the music and so can call on that response when the storm starts. Relaxation music is less likely to work if the first time they ever hear it is after they are already having a small panic attack.

#### 5) Counter conditioning (Recondition their 'emotional' state during storms)

**Again this is much more successful EARLY on with minor to moderate phobias.** Also this can be done during known and anticipated noisy times (fireworks, known incoming storms) when you are raising a pup and wish to try to avoid the development of noise phobias and anxieties.

If I have a mildly anxious dog then I make sure I keep a bag of their favorite treat on hand, frozen if need be (if it is boiled chicken or something like that) so that I can immediately get to a very high valued treat. Toys (whether regular or food related toys) and games work well too, be prepared to play whatever game it is that strongly attracts and keeps their attention.



Then whenever the dog first begins to act anxious, I distract them with the treat or game. For pups just be prepared to distract them ever so often with treat or game while the storm is raging, and always be upbeat and interactive. For pups it need not be constant, just enough to make sure they have a pleasant experience and do not spend time cowering fearfully from the commotion of the storm or fireworks.

With the fearful dog, I do not make a 'big deal' of anything. When they begin to act unsettled, then I offer some treats (or chew toys) and my attention as needed to distract them and get them to settle. Then, once settled, I give them something else to focus on like a stuffed Kong, or puzzle toy. If they like playing ball then I toss the ball for them and keep them occupied with that. That sort of engagement can continue as long as needed to keep them from focusing on the storm.

**When handing out treats make sure that you do NOT hand them out every time the dog acts fearful (you are rewarding the wrong behavior).** Distract them from their distress first and offer the treat when they are calm and responding to you rather than the storm.

## 6) Body Wraps

First for these to work you need to have made the dog comfortable wearing the wraps and having the wraps put on LONG BEFORE the noise anxiety issue is ongoing. **Practice applying it and having them wear it before the storm !!**

For some dogs (and overly reactive dogs seem to be higher in numbers helped), firm soft pressure around their upper body is very relaxing. This can actually assist some dogs for a variety of reasons (shy, nervous, fearful, needing confidence, stressed, hyper-excitabile, car sickness). There are commercial products made for this (such as [Thundershirt](#) and [Anxiety wrap](#)) which you can certainly try. **The basics of how they work has to do with the fit being much more firm (yet pliable) than a regular loose doggie sweater or t-shirt. The fit is intended to be very firm like swaddling a baby.**



There are other methods to try and produce a similar result (and certainly they can be worth a try before spending money on a special shirt only to find out your individual dog was not helped by one). Try a T-shirt or Sweat Shirt wrap and then apply an Ace Bandage wrap over the top as described below to get the proper swaddling wrap :

- **T-shirt wrap** – The aim is to have a firm fitting t-shirt overall, not a big loose one. Try taking a T-shirt and putting it over the dog's head with the front of the T-Shirt facing up on their back. Put the front legs through the arm holes, and tie up any looseness toward the dog's rump with a knot over their back or with a scrunchie. You can also take a plastic can lid and cut an 'X' in it and feed the extra hem through until it is comfortably tight.
- **Sweat shirt wrap** – some dogs do better with a heavier material. Take a size appropriate sweat shirt and lay it across their back and tie the long arms loosely under their neck. For really small dogs, you can make a wrap from a sweat shirt arm, just cut the appropriate leg holes and make certain there are not binding too close to allow free movement of the legs.
- **Ace Bandage** – there are several methods for applying partial to full body wraps with an ace bandage described. Be certain you are comfortable and familiar with using elastic bandage material without pulling it too tight. For smaller dogs you want the two inch bandage, and for the larger dogs the 3-4 inch bandage. The Half or quarter wrap method with an Ace bandage can be used in concert with a t-shirt or sweat shirt as described above as well.

The following videos about the bandage wraps may be useful :

[Quarter Wrap TTouch Method](#)  
[Full Body Wrap TTouch Method](#)  
[Demonstration of several of the wrap methods](#)

## 7) Help Avoid Electrostatic Build Up

Animals are very sensitive to many aspects of storms that we cannot sense well. Dogs can sense the static charge buildup before a thunderstorm. It is a warning that lightning may strike which is a perfectly rational thing to react to and be aware of for them. Some dogs that are highly sensitive to this build up often try to escape the static charge by moving toward items or areas that are more electrically grounded such as sinks, bathtubs, shower stalls, behind toilets, or up against metal radiators or pipes.

There are some ways to try to combat this if it is part of what sets your dog off. One is to cover the crate with a double layer of heavy duty aluminum foil. Or if they hide under the bed try slipping a layer of aluminum foil between the box spring and mattress. The second is to try one of the commercially available shirts made for static discharge reduction ([Storm Defender Cape](#)). No this does not help every dog, but it is the ticket for some of them. You can always try the foil method and see if you notice any improvement at all before you spend cash on the cape.

## 8) Natural Therapies

For some animals these can be a very effective tool. All you can do is try the different things and see if one or a combination of them will help.

The ones most commonly touted are :

- Essential Oil of Lavender – either applied lightly to the back of the neck, dabbed onto a bandanna worn around the neck, or used in a diffuser. This also has been shown to help decrease anxiety about riding in the car. ‘Young Living’ makes a roll on formula called [Tranquil](#) that is handy for this.
- [ProQuiet](#) – a tryptophan supplement, easily found online in numerous places
- [Adaptil collar/spray](#) – pheromone spray or collar that is very relaxing to some dogs. Used to be called the DAP collar. Very effective for some dogs.
- [Rescue Remedy](#) – made by Bach Flower Essences, comes in liquid that can be lightly applied to the dog’s body, a bandanna, or 3-4 drops placed in their food or water.
- [Harmonease tablets](#) - Tablets with a blend of Magnolia officinalis and Phellodendron amurense extracts blend of Magnolia officinalis and Phellodendron amurense extracts



There is a nice walk through of how someone uses the holistic methods for their dog found at this site :<http://theholisticanimal.wordpress.com/tag/ttouch/>

## 9) Desensitize them

This can work wonders for some dogs (sometimes even for the severely affected ones). However, do recall that it is not only noise that triggers the fear response in some animals (lights, vibration, pressure changes, etc) and for that reason some animals do not respond to attempts to desensitize them with recorded noise alone.

Basically you play recordings of thunderstorm noises (lots of free recordings on you tube) at a low volume which does NOT induce fear reactions while engaging the dog with positive stimuli (treats, toys, games, attention, etc). You increase the volume slowly over a period of several weeks while continuing to engage them with positive distractions. Definitely worth a try for some. If you are interested there are [thunderstorm anxiety cd's](#) put together for this that have more detailed instructions.

## 10) Drugs

Yes, there are drugs that can be used to assist in all levels of storm/noise anxiety. **Using an antianxiety medication early on in the evolution of this fear can actually settle it down entirely in some dogs.** There are numerous choices (Xanax or Valium) which can be used episodically if needed and I find they are generally useful for mild anxieties. Moderate sufferers (or in situations where the dog has to be alone during storm season) and dogs that are routinely highly anxious even without storms may benefit from using Prozac for a period of time while the owner is working on behavioral therapies. Dogs that suffer moderate or severe issues with storm anxiety may benefit greatly from the daily use of a medication like Prozac or Clomicalm as they often allow some of the other methods to be used much more successfully during needed storm episodes.



An older drug, Acepromazine, which is purely a tranquilizer is still often used to good effect, for certain individuals. Acepromazine is often erroneously referred to online these days as a dissociative anesthetic, this is incorrect, and seems to have been misquoted now by nearly every online reference. It is merely a sedative and only a sedative which means it will make the dog very sleepy but it will not do anything to alleviate the dog's anxiety (this also means that the sedative effects can be overwhelmed by the dog's anxiety if strong enough). It has more potential side effects than the others, but it has a longer duration of action so it is important to evaluate all the choices with the right information in hand and use what works for the individual. Call us, we can certainly help there.

## 11) Contact us

We can always help tailor specific management protocols to fit your pets' individual needs and manifestations for any behavioral problem. The most commonly effective solution tends to be a proper drug choice **along with** a combination of some of the above suggestions. We can even provide a referral to a behavioral specialist if needed. **Just remember, if the problem is worsening, seek our help sooner rather than later !!**

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### A personal case example on the subject :

My Aussie, Trip, began to get mildly unsettled by storms when we moved here because of the intensity and severity of the lightening often associated with storms here. I chose to give him a low dose of valium for each large storm since someone is almost always at home with him when a storm starts and he is not a generally anxious dog. Then when I was home, I made sure to engage him with me and hold his attention until he was relaxed entirely.



For him that meant alternating between giving him his favored chew toy, or tossing him some bits of chicken, or gathering up his herd of tennis balls and having him fetch some of the stray 'members of the herd'. Basically I used his OCD about gathering tennis balls into a pile to his benefit by continuing to scatter the 'herd' and leave him to corral them all once more. Once he settled down I would leave him be and if he started to act anxious again, then I just engaged him once more with something else on the list.

It really only took a few times during one season to see a definite decrease in his level of anxiety. These days he seldom gets distressed by a storm unless it is a really huge crash banger, and even then he can be settled down quickly and easily.