

Firework fear -

Help!

My dog needs help right now!

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Introduction

OK, so you are reading this information because your dog is scared of fireworks (or thunder) and it's happening right now... or at least very soon...

The reality is that resolving firework fear takes months of dedicated retraining and patience. However, right now you don't have that luxury, so please take a vow that you will address this properly once the crisis has passed, and focus on getting through the next few days (or hours) instead in the best way you can.

The good news is that there is a lot of action you can take. I have summarised this, as you don't have time to spend reading – you need to help your dog!



1. Basic practicalities

- o Stay with your dog. (It's so obvious but please don't think you can nip out to watch the display... you owe it to your dog to stay with him or her and be his rock.)
- o Exercise your dog earlier in the day so there's no risk of him being startled by a firework while you are outside. Make sure he or she has been to the toilet so he won't need to go out in the dark
- o Feed your dog earlier in the afternoon, so he already has a full tummy and is more likely to be calm and sleepy by evening
- o Close the windows and curtains to minimise the sound
- o Put the TV or music on to drown out the noise

2. The rules of reassurance

- o The good news is that cuddling, petting or talking to your dog won't make his or her fearful behaviour worse. However, if your own behaviour is 'weird', over-the-top, anxious or out of character then this won't help your dog to feel relaxed either!
- o Some dogs enjoy massage, and Tellington Touch (<http://www.ttouch.com>) can help too.
- o Be calm. Be strong. Be there for your dog. Focus on the positives and think all the time about what helps your dog to feel better rather than thinking about how upsetting it is seeing him or her distressed.
- o Obviously, no punishment! Scolding, telling off, or physical restraint will all make your dog feel worse.

3. Build a den

- o Create a 'hidey hole' for your dog to go into if he just can't cope. Many dogs like to 'den' when they feel frightened and will try to get behind the sofa or the loo if there's nowhere else to go.
- o Use an indoor crate if your dog is already familiar with one. Put it somewhere near where you will be. Cover the crate with several layers of thick blankets and make sure your dog can nest inside by burrowing in blankets and bedding.
- o It's worth putting some clothing or bedding inside the crate that smells of you, as most dogs find this reassuring.
- o Encourage your dog to go in if he or she wants to (but obviously don't force them in if they don't!)
- o If you don't have an indoor crate then use your creativity to build a den using furniture or a large cardboard box, but do make sure that the den is stable and no part of it will fall on your dog.

4. Distractions, distractions, distractions

If your dog is coping fairly well, try and engage him in 'cognitive' tasks. The more fun distractions you can use, the better his or her long-term memory of this event will be.

- o Give your dog fun stuff to do – a filled Kong, a snuffle mat, a Buster cube, a long-lasting chew. Or, make it really easy – chase the treat one at a time, scatter food, do some basic training. Research tells us that problem-solving reduces fear in dogs over time.
- o At the very least, throw your dog a very tasty food treat after every sound from outside. You stand a good chance of pairing the noises with getting positive reinforcement, and helping to change your dog's mind about what they mean.



5. Pheromones and smells

- o Adaptil. These products (a collar worn by the dog and a diffuser which you plug in around the home) are based on the use of 'dog appeasing pheromone', and are intended to send out 'comforting messages' via scent. The research surrounding this is varied; the best benefits were seen when used in conjunction with behavioural therapy.
- o Diffuser with dilute lavender oil. Some research suggests that dogs rested more and barked less when exposed to the scent of lavender in their environment. It's worth a try, especially if you can use it at other times when the dog is calm and relaxed to build positive associations with it as well.

6. Pressure vests

Although the research on the efficacy of 'pressure vests' is somewhat mixed, some owners swear by them. There are several different brands, or you can make your own from an old T-shirt. The idea is that the 'vest' fits very tightly to the body and applies gentle, constant pressure, similar to swaddling an infant. (Note: Research has shown that if the vest is too loose it has no positive effect at all.)

The best-known brands are:

- o Thundershirt
- o Anxiety Wrap
- o Storm Defender
- o T-touch Wrap



7. Medication

- o Talk to your vet – a new medication called Sileo has recently been licenced specifically for sound aversion in dogs. It comes as a gel which is placed between the dog's cheek and gum, and works fast – usually within minutes, and lasts about two hours. It can also be re-applied after this time. It does not cause sedation (unlike the old 'sedative' treatments, such as ACP which are to be avoided as they can make dogs' fear worse rather than better) and seems to be well tolerated by most dogs. Owners need to wear gloves when applying the gel.
- o Adaptil tablets – this medication is available without prescription and the makers claim that they work within 2 hours and reduce fear symptoms in dogs by 50% over a 7-day period. It gets mixed reviews on Amazon.
- o Rescue Remedy. One of the Bach Flower remedies, this is a herbal product which is usually added to the dog's water. There is little evidence to support its efficacy in animals, but people have been shown to experience a reduction in anxiety when using the human version, and it's believed to have an effect after just an hour.

