

# Weathering the ‘Perfect Storm’ for Dogs

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We’re very lucky on Capitol Hill. With multiple parks, many wide boulevards and tree-lined streets, we have one of the quietest urban landscapes in any city. Despite that, our dogs are “city dogs,” meaning that street traffic, crowds, helicopters and other urban noises don’t really bother them all that much. Usually.

So, what is it about thunder that makes a 95-pound pit bull hide behind the washing machine? Or forces Bella, the 165-pound Great Dane in Southwest, to run into the bathroom and curl up in the tub with her face buried in her paws every time she hears that clap of thunder? We have had a lot of shaking this spring, which is going on record as one of the wettest, stormiest seasons in over a hundred years.

Shaking isn’t even the worst of it. Many dogs will not only pant and hide, they’ll dig through carpeting and door jams, rip apart window sills, knock over lamps and tables in their panic and even jump through windows to get away from the storm. The sad part is that we know there’s no way to get away.

So why do our brave dogs struggle against nature so desperately? For one thing, it’s fear of the unknown. It can get worse with repeated exposure and become a real phobia. Webster’s Dictionary describes a phobia as “an exaggerated, usually inexplicable and illogical fear of a particular object or situation.” But it’s not always irrational. We’ll get to that.

Thunderstorm phobia is one the most common behavioral problems we face with our dogs. The reasons for this aren’t entirely clear. Are they reacting to the sound of the thunder? Lightning or wind? Or something else? According to Dr. Karen Overall, noted veterinary behaviorist who has done much work with phobia reactions in dogs, thunderstorm phobias are extremely common. And dogs with storm phobias may have phobias to other loud noises or stimuli, as well as separation anxiety.

A study published a few years ago noted that thunderstorm phobia may be breed-related, which means that more herding and sporting dogs, which are bred to react immediately, may be affected. The thinking is that their quick reactions don’t result in any subsequent response by the thunder, therefore anxiety results. This study also commented on rescue dogs, which may be more likely to have storm phobia due to previous lives of trauma. Yet at our shelter, this doesn’t seem to be the case. When I walk through the more than 200 sleeping dogs late afternoons, they are indeed sleeping (or at least resting), in spite of the rain on the skylights, thunder and flashes of lightning.

So, what do we do?

First of all, the key is not to panic yourself. Dogs are far more attuned to non-verbal cues than we are – or than most of us are. If we panic, they panic. And crawling on the floor or onto the dog bed to hug and console them just makes things worse by reinforcing that the world is indeed coming to an end.

Instead, act normally. Pet your dog gently and speak calmly to reassure him, but avoid excessive displays of concern. Instead, distract and reward. Reinforce basic commands such as sit, stay and down. Let them focus on routine, normal activities that may distract them from the sounds of the storm. The goal is to tell them that the storm is no big deal. “Be calm and we’ll ride it out together.” This can help but probably won’t lead to real peace until the weather moves east of us.

We used to think you could desensitize or counter-condition dogs to thunderstorms. This is one of the most difficult things in the world to do with dogs. And it doesn’t work. The theory was to use recordings that gently accustomed animals to the sounds of a storm. This was so hard to do (when was the last time your dog noticed any recorded sound anyway?) that it comes as a relief to learn it didn’t work anyway.

But do noise and light really have anything to do with what our dogs are experiencing? In actual fact, storm phobia may not be so irrational after all. The latest theory actually implicates static electricity as the real culprit. We’ve all seen this – some dogs start to pace and shake for half an hour or more before we even suspect a storm is coming. This may be due to the sudden pressure drop and, get this, the electrical charge in the air.

Dr. Nicolas Dodman, a very popular veterinary behaviorist at Tufts University, has observed that frightened dogs sense the buildup of static charge during a storm. This may explain why some dogs retreat to bathrooms or laundry rooms – places near sinks, metal pipes and drains, to discharge the electrical buildup. They are literally “grounding” themselves.

The latest defense tactic targets this static electricity with coats made out of flannel or other cloth and an electrically-conductive material containing metallic thread to discharge the electric charge. You can find these advertised as “storm defender” capes, anxiety wraps, or “thundershirts” (got to love that one) among others. Hopefully, after wearing the coat through a few storms, dogs learn that rain, thunder and lightning, and changes in barometric pressure aren’t so scary after all. Especially when they stop getting shocked! There have also been reports that anti-static dryer sheets can work if you rub them on your dog. And depending on the scent, there could be other benefits as well!

Always a last resort, there are drugs. If all else fails, see your vet. A mild tranquilizer or anti-anxiety medication like Xanax may really help. But timing is the issue here. You have to be ready for the storm, be as accurate as our local meteorologists and be ready to give these medications at least 30 minutes before that first clap of thunder. And then there’s the issue of what if you’re not home when the storm lands?

Above all else, always make sure your dog can retreat to a safe area – a bed, a kennel, something secure to feel safe within. The good news for most of us is that our thunderstorm season lasts only a couple of months, most storms hit between 4 and 8 p.m., and we're done by August. So keep calm, don't overreact, put on the thundershirt and, if you need it, get a little help from your vet. It will be August before we even know it.



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