



# Greater Androscoggin Humane Society

[www.SavingPetsinMaine.org](http://www.SavingPetsinMaine.org)

## Noise Phobias in Dogs

Animal shelters universally report that July 5th and January 1st are two of the busiest days of the year in their kennels, caring for stray dogs who escaped the night before. Fear-induced adrenaline causes dogs to scale fences that would normally be more than adequate to keep them safely confined. Some even go through plate-glass windows and dig through doors in their frantic attempts to escape the torment of the noise.

**Fear Windows in Puppies** – Puppies go through critical periods of mental development (often called windows) that can last up until 14-18 months with various durations. Factors like breed, size, and environment can also play a role in length of time and age they go through these windows. The same experiences OUTSIDE this critical period might temporarily frighten a dog, but is much less likely to do permanent damage. During these “fear windows” of a young dog’s life, it is key to take extra precautions to avoid any long-term trauma. You can start to condition them to these new common phobias as a puppy by pairing them with food, during training, etc.

Fears may be triggered by thunderstorms, fireworks, gunshots, etc. but may also be caused by wind, rain, lightening, atmospheric pressure, and odors (gunpowder, etc.) not just the sound. These can be especially triggering if the dog has had any prior negative experiences with those events.

### Immediate Remedies –

- Your veterinarian can prescribe medications or over-the-counter medication recommendations to help address anxiety issues.
- Thunder wrap/Thunder vest (Similar to swaddling a colicky baby)
- Putting your dog in a room without windows to avoid light, sound increases (bathroom, etc.)
- Exercising him prior to upcoming event (fireworks, etc.) When he/she is happier and calmer, it may help with some of the anxiety.
- Playing calming music (white noise, etc.) and doing high-value training/enrichment with the dog during loud noise event.
- Always have identification like a microchip, collar and tags, etc. on your dog and if fireworks, a reflective tag/collar/light in case of flight response from yard in the dark.
- Consider boarding, asking a friend/sitter to come over, having your pup spend an overnight at a known friend/family member, or even a pup playdate if you know that you will be gone so the dog is not alone.

### Things to Avoid During Events -

- Bringing your dog to the event- They are better off at home.
- Leaving them alone specifically outside even if the fence is high and they are used to going outside. Flight response and adrenalin make it easier for a dog to scale/bolt from areas they normally wouldn’t.
- Crating them in a wire kennel without covering, enrichment, etc.
- Paying attention to how WE as humans react to stimuli and to our dog’s behavior (Coddling, soothing, acting differently than we normally would, etc.)

Behavior Helpline: 207-312-5873 or [Maria@gahumane.org](mailto:Maria@gahumane.org)



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**Systematic Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning** - To build confidence and a healthy, happier dog, systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning of emotional response takes time but is most effective long-term and it is fairly easy. Many people have reported a calmer, new emotional state during events within a few weeks, if consistently done. Some behaviorists say longer sessions of 30-45 minutes are more effective than how standard training sessions are conducted (typically 15-20 minutes per day).

Simulating Thunderstorms/Fireworks - Utilization of phone/audio equipment, Youtube videos, Pandora, etc. with recordings of thunder, fireworks, common noise stressors, and strobe lights/camera flashing etc. (to simulate lightning), and sprinklers/mister, hoses or even spray bottle sprayed up into the air (NEVER directly at animal) to create the sound and feel of rain on the window/roof (or moisture of rain falling on your dog.)

Process – Use extremely high-value treats (meat, cheese, etc. the fresher the better) as food is the only thing that will trump fear. Dogs learn by association and pairing food with a stimulus helps change emotional response. Start enrichment, feeding time, training session with low-level of stimuli. If the dog begins to show fear/won't eat, etc. turn noise down/off and try again later with a lower level or distance. You don't want to have the dog's emotional state elevate to a full fear response; you just want to find the level at which your dog begins to respond (sub-threshold.)

After five minutes or so, increase the sound slightly. (This is the desensitization part) and continue training, enrichment, treating, etc. if he is showing minimal stress. (This is the counter-conditioning part as you are pairing great things with the stimuli changing his response to anticipation of food etc. at hearing the sound.) Be generous with calm praise and treats (a human dispenser or if scatterfeeding for enrichment continuous tossing onto ground) and keep the sound at each level for several minutes before gradually increasing the volume again. Eventually, if systematically done and not increased too quickly where dog goes above sub-threshold, your dog will start to exhibit a milder fear response. (Panting, pacing, clinging to you, discontinuation of eating/training and other signs of tension are signs to watch for. If this happens you can either immediately turn the volume back down or wait and see if the dog "habituates" to that level of intensity. If the reaction is truly mild and you have been very gradual in increasing the volume, it is preferable to wait for habituation. (Lower/no response to stimuli.) Keep the volume at this level for a considerable period of time before increasing (this varies on the dog/their reaction). It often takes only a few sessions to move past the initial volume level. This can usually be accomplished in four to five days. Once your dog accepts loud thunderstorm noises you can reduce the volume and add the other stimuli, one at a time, until the response is minimal for all of them. Each time you add a new stimulus, reduce the intensity of the rest and gradually increase them again, one at a time. Also vary locations as this will help build confidence and avoid the dog associating this experience with one area.

Treat/Food Ideas - To avoid increase in caloric consumption you can buy freeze dried liver treats, chicken (if no known allergy) etc and use a coffee grinder and grind up into a powder. Use a tablespoon or two and coat/shake in a bag with half of a dog's daily ration and use in training, etc only. Shredded cheese, tiny bits of meat are also great to "scent" the dog's food overnight. These higher value items should only be given at training time as they need to stay at high-value.

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