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## Stormy weather

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I loved thunderstorms. Watching through the window as streaks of lightning ripped across the sky and then waiting in anticipation for the rumble that always followed. But all of that changed last year. Now, I cringe every time a storm is forecasted.

This change of heart came about last summer when I arrived home at the tail end of a storm to find our 10-year-old Rottweiler mix, Lucy, pacing frantically. Even more alarming were the huge strips of wood she had ripped from the door, the chunks of plaster clawed from the wall and the shredded window blinds splattered with blood, and strewn all over the dining room floor.

A week earlier during another storm, she had bent metal on the gate to our fenced-in backyard and escaped to the neighbor's house. This intense fear came on suddenly. In the nine years that Lucy has lived with us, she never once seemed bothered by storms. In fact, I often marveled at how she would play with her toys or sleep soundly even when the thunder exploded directly overhead.

Storm phobias are a common problem in dogs, and it's not unusual at all for the fear to develop later in life, according to Joana Watsky of Sit and Stay Dog Training and Behavioral Counseling. This fear of storms may also be accompanied by a fear of other loud noises – such as fireworks – even if a dog has never had a traumatic experience associated with those sounds. And, if left untreated, behaviorists say that a dog's fear will likely get worst.

"When dogs suffer from a fear of storms they are really suffering, and owners need to do something to make them feel better," says Watsky, who offers training classes in Nutley and Hoboken and also works privately with clients in North Jersey and New York City.

Because Lucy had hurt her mouth trying to literally eat through our walls and door, we consulted a veterinary behaviorist who prescribed medication to help her relax during the storm season.

The most typical symptoms of storm phobia are panting, shaking, crouching and hiding under beds or in dark closets. Some fear-stricken dogs will get as close as they can to their owners seeking comfort.

"The destructive behaviors happen when a scared dog is home alone and wants to escape from the storm," says Watsky.

So, how can we help our dogs to overcome their fear? The ideal scenario, Watsky says, is to start desensitization work with puppies (who rarely are afraid of storms). This process involves positive motivation training or play sessions during a thunderstorm. The idea is that the dog makes a positive association when lightning strikes.

"I desensitized my dog and now she is happy to sit outside and watch fireworks with me," says Watsky of her Bouvier Des Flandres, Annie. "The only time she ever had a problem with a storm was when it was right over our heads and even I was scared."

For families who have an adolescent or older dog who has already developed a fear of storms Watsky offers the following tips:

- 1) Get a commercial tape of a thunderstorm and start playing it very low while giving the dog a favorite treat or bone. The idea is to start slowly integrating the sound of the storm into the dog's space by raising the sound on the tape. If at any point the dog shows signs of fear lower the recording and start over.
- 2) If possible change the dog's environment during a storm. Put her in an area of the house where she is not used to hearing the thunder.
- 3) When you know a storm is coming, make sure your dog has been exercised and use white noise, television or stereo to block out the rumbling.
- 4) If a dog seems happier going in a crate or going under the bed, make sure he has easy access to these locations. The goal is help the dog to feel safer during the storm.
- 5) It's important that family members stay really calm during the storm so that they don't add to the dog's stress.
- 6) If a fearful dog wants to stay by your side let him. Try redirecting his attention with treats and praise him when he pays attention to you. It's best to begin this redirection exercise when the dog first starts to exhibit signs of restlessness. Once he is in a full blown fearful state, redirection may not be possible.
- 7) Brushing a dog's coat or giving a massage might help a fearful dog to relax.
- 8) Because dog owners may not be at home when a storm strikes, it's important to make sure that a fearful dog always has a safe place to go. Also, make sure that she has been exercised before you leave the house and keep a radio on to help drown out fearful noises.
- 8) If none of the above tips seem to help and your dog continues to exhibit extreme stress at the sound of thunder consult a veterinary behaviorist. Some dogs may require medication to help them get through the storm season.

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Resource:

July 4th is not a fun holiday for dogs who are fearful of storms or loud noises. For information on how to help your dog get through the holiday visit the ASPCA at [www.aspc.org/pet-care/pet-care-tips/july-4th.html](http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/pet-care-tips/july-4th.html)