

## **I CAN'T STAND THE NOISE.....**

November is here and with it the start of firework season. Sometimes this seems to go on for days, and even right up to New Year, which is a long time if you are scared of the bangs. Regular readers of my column may recall previous stories I have told of terrified pets. Dogs may try to escape, drool, urinate or defecate, pant, chew and tremble in their panic if they have developed a phobia to such noises. So what, if anything, can be done to help a terrified pet?

There is no guarantee that a firework noise phobia can be 'cured', but in many instances the fear can be helped. How effective the treatment is depends on a number of factors including the severity of the phobia, how long the pet has had it and the amount of time the owner is willing to commit to the 'behavioural therapy'. The first thing to remember is that you should refrain from giving excessive attention or punishment when your pet is scared as constant consoling may be interpreted by it as a reward for the scared response. In the event of constantly reassuring a dog during a firework display, for example, it may signal to the pet that that it is really something he should be afraid of. Instead distract your dogs' attention in the form of playing, grooming, or other activities it enjoys.

In the short term, with Bonfire night around the corner, it is a matter of turning to medication. Your Veterinary Surgeon can advise you further on this. Drugs may be needed although pheromones and herbal preparations are also often helpful. In the long term it is important to try and acclimatise your dog to the sounds it is scared of. Changing the environment by creating a safe haven often helps. Some pets feel more comfortable in a small space such as a crate or a small room like a bathroom, leaving the fan and lights on, and the door open. Rewarding your pet while it sits quietly often helps and reinforces the haven as a nice place to be.

Desensitisation can also be very effective as follows. Teach your pet a command such as 'Quiet' in the absence of any noise using tasty treats to reward it frequently when it is lying peacefully. Once your pet can relax on command, you are ready to carry on. Obtain a CD of a firework display and play the recording at normal volume to see if it induces the scared response. If it does, continue with the desensitization; if not, you will need to obtain a different recording. For some animals, a recording alone may not work, since there may be a combination of occurrences that provokes fear. Play the recording at a volume low enough that your pet is aware of the sound, but it does not show fear. For instance, the head may turn towards the source of the sound, but you still have the pet's attention. In some instances, that may mean the pet needs to be in a different room from where the recording is playing. While the recording is playing at the low level tell him to be quiet or engage him in an activity in which you give the commands, such as obedience training or performing tricks. Give food or other rewards during the activity when the pet accomplishes what he is supposed to. If the animal shows signs of being scared, stop and try again the next day, playing the recording at an even lower level. It is important that the pet not be rewarded while he is scared or anxious. Sessions should last about 5-10 minutes. Once successful repeat the sessions but gradually increase the volume each time until he can tolerate the louder sounds. The frequency can then be gradually decreased say to once weekly but often you will need to continue life long treatment.

With dedication on your part you can get your pet through this stressful time of year for them. The important thing is to do something. If you need help speak to your Veterinary Surgeon now!

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