

Finding Calm in the Storm

When summer squalls send pets into a tailspin, treatment can help them regain control

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

Patty Khuly will never forget the day she witnessed a panic-stricken dog get hit by a car during one of Florida's infamous summer thunderstorms. Driving past a gated home, she saw a German shepherd scramble over a cinder block wall. Before she could pull over, a thunderclap sent the terrified animal tearing across several lawns and into a four-lane road. "He got hit just as he had almost gotten across," she says.

A veterinarian in the Miami area, Khuly rushed the dog to the hospital where she works—but he died en route. In one fatal flash on a Saturday morning, a family pet was gone.

Khuly says the shepherd's behavior was most likely caused by thunderstorm phobia, which affects dogs, cats, and other pets to varying degrees. A certain amount of anxiety during extreme weather is a natural, life-preserving instinct, notes veterinary neurologist Susan Wagner, citing the case of animals who headed for higher ground

during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. But phobic pets take this response to an unhealthy level. The problem can be difficult to treat, but with time and dedicated effort, pets can be taught to ride out storms.

Phobia symptoms vary; pets may pant

and drool, shiver uncontrollably, shed, pace from room to room, or climb on their owners. In extreme cases, dogs may tear up carpet and furniture, lose control of their bladders or bowels, cram themselves into tight spaces, or jump over fences. Certified applied animal behaviorist Patricia McConnell recalls one client whose yellow Lab jumped out a window; he "went through the glass and just lacerated the entire length of his back, fell two stories, and then ran away," she says.

Because storm fears tend to worsen over time, early intervention can make a difference. After their border collie developed a phobia at 9 months old, Philadelphia residents Jennifer and Dennis Chapman used positive conditioning techniques to reduce Chase's anxiety. "What we do is hold our breath and then breathe out audibly, and as soon as we see her exhale and relax, we give her a treat," says Jennifer. Chase can also hunker down in one of several safe places in the house, and whenever there is at least a 30 percent chance of a storm, the couple gives her medication prescribed by their veterinary behaviorist. "I can tell she still doesn't like the sound of thunder," Jennifer says, "but she definitely seems more relaxed and happy with her life."

Pets' hypersensitivity may broaden beyond thunder to other storm-related phenomena such as barometric pressure changes, static electricity buildup, lightning,



Thunderstorms once transformed Boomer (right) into a drooling, cowering mess. Today she finds comfort in her new friend Nonie, a rescued puppy mill dog who drapes herself over the shih tzu during storms to help calm her.

Fear Busters

and wind. They also can pick up on the anxiety of others in the household. Penny Milligan of Somerville, N.J., says her once calm cat began shivering during storms after living with her phobic dog. Now, both cat and dog dash into the bathroom at the first clap of thunder, often wedging themselves behind the toilet.

In some cases, the presence of others may have the opposite effect. Marsha and C.J. Stevens-Pino's shih tzu used to be virtually inconsolable during storms. Boomer would bark, leave puddles of drool on the couch, run from room to room, and cower in the bathtub, to the point that C.J. often feared for the dog's life.

Then came a new addition to the family: Nonie, a 7-pound Maltese rescued by The HSUS and Wayne County Animal Control from a North Carolina puppy mill where she'd been caged constantly to breed. Adopted from SPCA Tampa Bay, which helped care for animals after the raid, the dog couldn't walk at first, Marsha says, and "Boomer instantly seemed to know that Nonie was broken." Nonie began shadowing her, and having a friend to protect has bolstered Boomer's courage. An herbal concoction has also helped diminish her fears. When a particularly loud storm rolls through, the dogs reverse roles, with Nonie draping herself on top of Boomer as if to say, "OK, settle down; I'm right here."

Owners of phobic cats may mistakenly think they have a lesser problem to tackle. Deb Mendez remembers watching her cat dart into hiding whenever a storm rolled through. It wasn't until talking with owners of phobic dogs that she realized her cat was probably also afflicted. Such misconceptions are common in feline households, says board-certified veterinary behaviorist Lisa Radosta, noting that owners typically don't know to seek help until their own lives are somehow affected.

But Khuly says scared cats need help, too, even if they have not become destructive or neurotic. "Just because they are not bothering us when they are hiding under the bed," she says, "doesn't mean they aren't suffering."

Left untreated, storm phobias can have disastrous consequences. An owner may decide to relinquish the pet or have him euthanized, while a scared dog could turn up lost at an animal shelter after bolting during a storm. Moreover, chronic stress can impair a pet's immune system and overall health; in the worst-case scenario, the animal may even suffer a fatal heart attack.

Through a combination of the following steps, the condition is treatable, though a complete reversal isn't always possible, says board-certified veterinary behaviorist Lisa Radosta. "Most owners don't go for the 'Holy Grail,' which takes diligent work with the dog—maybe up to a year or more in advanced cases," she says. "... But they can get the dog to the point where their quality of life is greatly improved and they are not frantic with panic."

► **BUILD A STORM BUNKER:** Find a dark, quiet, and easily accessible place such as a basement, closet, or bathroom, and teach your pet to relax in this "safe area" during normal weather. Fill it with pillows, favorite playthings, and toys stuffed with treats. You can also place a kennel in the room with the door open. As a storm approaches, coax the pet to enter the refuge, then use a fan, television, or radio to drown out noise.

► **DESENSITIZE:** Before storm season hits, play a CD of storm sounds once a day, at a volume low enough that your pet responds but isn't anxious. Increase the volume each day, coupling it with commands and rewards, playtime, or treats. When storms are expected, start the fun before your pet shows signs of anxiety.

► **SEEK HELP FROM THE PHARMACY:** For severe phobias, vet-prescribed medications coupled with behavior modification can help. Medications such as Clomicalm and Reconcile are administered throughout the storm season, while fast-acting Valium and Xanax are for individual events. Over time, medications may be needed less frequently or not at all.

► **CREATE A NATURAL CALM:** Synthetic products that mimic cat and dog pheromones can alleviate anxiety. (If you have pet birds, consult your veterinarian before using an aerosol.) A homeopathic vet may also prescribe other calming products. Sound therapy is another option: In 2008, psychoacoustics and animal behavior experts produced *Through a Dog's Ear: Music to Calm Your Canine Companion*. This CD of piano arrangements stemmed from a study that found certain sounds to have a calming effect on dogs.

► **SNUGGLE UP:** Made of soft cloth, the Storm Defender cape has a metallic lining to shield pooches from static charge buildup. It drapes over the dog's back, with straps that tie around the neck and chest for a semi-snug fit. Although a study published in 2009 found the product worked only marginally better than a placebo cape, Radosta sometimes tells her clients to give it a try. Another product, the Anxiety Wrap, is made of a fitted, lightweight fabric and designed to provide calming pressure. A study on its effectiveness is currently being conducted. Finally, Mutt Muffs may help reduce anxiety by muffling storm sounds.



An Anxiety Wrap helps soothe rescued dog Pugsly during thunderstorms.

