



**STARTING OFF ON THE RIGHT PAW – DVGRR TIPS FOR ADOPTERS & OWNERS OF ALL DOGS.**

## **Handling Thunderstorm Phobia in Dogs**

Among the common behavior challenges we see in dogs, thunderstorm phobia ranks right up there at the top. A high number of Golden Retrievers are surrendered to rescue programs like ours because of extreme anxiety during storms; others may not manifest this until they are in their new homes. If you've never lived with a dog that was fearful of storms, consider yourself lucky – it can be an extremely frustrating and difficult problem to manage. And watching a dog's escalating panic and agitation over something they don't understand and are so desperately afraid of is heartbreaking.

Phobias are defined as persistent, irrational fears leading to a compelling desire to avoid the source of the fear. The reasons so many dogs react with fear to thunderstorms are, unfortunately, not well understood or known. There are, however, certainly many factors in play.

### **FEAR TRIGGERS**

Since people often dislike the loud boom of thunder, we may assume *that* scary noise in particular is the main source of the problem. Indeed, thunder usually plays a major role – whether a faraway rumble that dogs can no doubt hear even before we do or the deafening crack of a storm right overhead. If it is uncomfortably loud for us, think how intense it must be for a species with super-sensitive hearing.

Besides thunder, dogs may also react to one or more other storm-associated triggers. These can include flashes of lightning, strong wind, the heavy pounding of rain, or changes in barometric pressure. The presence of increased ozone in the air, a side-effect of lightning, may cause some dogs to associate ozone's metallic odor with other scary elements of storms. Finally, the buildup of static electricity can be uncomfortable or even painful. If a dog receives even a mild shock from such static it will only serve to reinforce that storms are very bad things indeed the next time one rolls in.

### **TYPICAL BEHAVIORS**

We often tell adopters the most common behaviors associated with thunderstorm phobia involve the “three Ps” – pacing, panting, and pawing. If you are really unlucky, your dog may add peeing to the list! Obviously, each dog is different in terms of the symptoms he or she may exhibit. Below are some other characteristic behaviors, listed in approximate order of increasing severity:

- Trembling or shaking
- Restlessness
- Drooling
- Dilated pupils
- Seeking out humans – sitting close by, leaning or trying to climb on them
- Barking, whining, or howling
- Hiding in small places – under tables, behind chairs, in closets or bathrooms, in the bathtub
- Destructiveness – chewing walls or furniture, clawing at drapes, “digging” at floors, scratching woodwork
- Uncontrollable panic or anxiety, inability to stay in one place

- Trying to escape – jumping through windows, digging out of yards, running away

## MANAGEMENT AND TREATMENT

The good news is that there is a whole host of possible ways to deal with thunderstorm phobia. The bad news is that figuring out which one or ones may work for your dog is largely a matter of trial and error – dogs are extremely individual in terms of how they respond to the various techniques for reducing or eliminating their anxiety. In many cases, a combination of techniques may be necessary to achieve any significant change in behavior. As with so many other aspects of canine care, patience, time, and creativity are key elements in helping your dog get past this frustrating problem.

In this article, we'll list as many potential remedies to try as possible. (Please see the corresponding article on our website to access the relevant links.) Choose the options you think are most likely to be successful for your dog or are most practical for you to implement. If your initial efforts don't work or only offer modest improvement, give something else a try. And if you come across a helpful hint or solution not listed here, please tell us so we can pass it on to other adopters and dog owners!

*Please note that DVGRR does not necessarily endorse or recommend any of the commercial products listed in this article. We have used some at Golden Gateway and can provide feedback on our experience here for those; others are listed for informational purposes only.*

### 1. Be Available

Your presence during a storm is not a panacea unto itself, but most dogs tend to panic even more if they are alone. And if you are home, you can at least monitor the situation and avoid returning to a house torn apart by an anxious dog. **Therefore, one of the most basic things you can do is try to be WITH your dog whenever storms are predicted or actually occur.** This is why we often try to place moderately or severely thunderphobic rescue dogs into homes with retired individuals, people who work from home, or other situations where a family member is home on a very frequent basis.

Of course, no one is home 24 hours a day, and for the majority of families and individuals, work and other obligations prevent them from regularly being home during storms much as they might like to be. It's incredibly frustrating to be sitting in your office or in your car and see the darkening skies or hear the low thunder that signify an approaching storm, knowing your dog is home on its own. Practicality often trumps ability when it comes to being available; still, to the best extent possible, try to have at least one human present whenever your dog must weather a storm.

Keep in mind that having a human with your dog can mean transporting your dog to another location, other than your home. **Doggie day care is an option that some owners use, signing their dogs up with a program and using it on those days on which thunderstorms are predicted.** You can drop the dog off in the morning and return after work, gaining some peace of mind that if a storm does take place your dog won't be alone. At DVGRR, we offer day boarding for dogs adopted from us (and their canine siblings), so that is certainly something to keep in mind. Of course, this plan works best when the weather forecasters are accurate in their predictions! Also, be sure whatever day care program you use, the staff is aware of your dog's storm fears and trained to respond.

## 2. Be Calm

***Your own emotional reactions and responses are also very key.*** Despite what you may be feeling inside, it's essential not to convey anger, frustration, or exasperation to your dog – trust us, this will only worsen the situation. Instead, you want to project a very calm, matter-of-fact, upbeat attitude, one that communicates, “Yes, it's storming outside, but you are not going to be hurt, and you don't need to be afraid or anxious.”

Much debate currently exists as to whether comforting an anxious dog during a storm is appropriate and/or helpful. You'll find many articles and books that tell you to ignore anxious behavior, that talking in a soothing voice or overly comforting the dog (“It's OK...you'll be fine, don't be afraid.”) only serves to reinforce the behavior and make it more likely to occur again the next time. The theory is that the dog doesn't understand your words, but your attention, soft voice, and petting inadvertently reward him for acting scared or upset.

Other trainers or behavior specialists disagree with that theory and do not feel that comfort in and of itself is detrimental. Most likely, the best course of action lies somewhere in the middle – i.e., allowing (or even encouraging) your dog to look to you for security and reassurance, but not being overly solicitous, overprotective, or making a big deal out of the dog's fear. “Comfort, don't coddle” should be your guideline.

## 3. Change Your Dog's Attitude and Perception

Oh how we all wish we could just sit our dogs down, explain what's going on with a storm, and quickly eliminate any phobic reactions and fears. While the English language version is surely not going to work with your anxious pooch, there *are* ways you can communicate to your dog that all that stress and those “three Ps” (or more) really aren't necessary. Behavior modification is always worth a try, although its success is likely to depend on how severe your dog's issues are with storms and how long he or she has been suffering with those issues.

***The two techniques generally employed are called counter conditioning and desensitization – they are closely related and often used hand-in-hand.*** You may be familiar with them from other training situations with your current dog or previous dogs; they have wide application for any number of canine behavior challenges.

***Counter conditioning involves changing your dog's emotional reaction to a scary or unpleasant experience.*** Somewhere along the line, a thunderphobic dog has learned to associate the sounds, sights, and sensations of a thunderstorm with something bad; they have become *conditioned* to think that storm = bad stuff. Thus, as a storm begins to brew, the dog's anxiety automatically kicks in – it's not something over which they have control. Our job is to reverse that association, i.e., to *counter condition* the dog to think that storm = good stuff. To do that, you pair the scary experience (the storm) with something the dog really likes or enjoys. You can feed him super tasty treats, play a favorite game in the house, dance around and sing (presuming that would be pleasant for your dog!), go for a car ride (if safe), or anything else that your dog typically enjoys. Partly you are distracting him from the storm, but more importantly you are teaching him that a storm predicts something fun or happy going on, not something scary.

**Desensitization is the process of using repeated exposure to an object or experience to reduce or eliminate the fear associated with it.** The fear-inducing object or experience must be presented in gradually increasing intensity over time, so the person or animal basically learns to “get used to it.” For thunderstorm phobia in dogs, you can try using one of several commercially available CDs that simulate the sounds of a storm. You start out playing them at very low levels and increase the level slowly, often pairing the sound of the CD with something pleasant for your dog (i.e., using counter conditioning jointly). Unfortunately, using desensitization with thunderstorms is generally not as effective as it is with other kinds of fears, since the sound aspect of a storm is only one of the typical fear triggers. Nonetheless, here are some products you may want to try:

- [Canine Noise Phobia Series](#) – Victoria Stillwell
- [CalmAudio](#) – Sound Desensitization CD for Dogs
- [Sounds Good Audio CD](#) – Legacy Canine Behavior and Training

Both counter conditioning and desensitization often require a lot of patience and commitment on the part of the owner as they don’t work overnight. Still, they can be fairly effective for dogs with mild to moderate thunderstorm anxiety. For dogs with severe anxiety, they are far less likely to make any significant impact. Give them a try, but keep your expectations realistic.

#### 4. Modify the Inside Environment

Let’s face it, there’s not a lot you can do to change the fact that it’s storming. You can, however, modify the dog’s *inside* environment to minimize the effects of what’s happening outside. Here are some ideas to try:

- **Close curtains, blinds, or drapes** to reduce the visual impact of the storm.
- **Turn lights on**, especially if the storm is occurring at night.
- **Turn on the TV or radio** (loudly) as a distraction or sound muffler.
- **Provide some “white noise”** to mask the sounds of the storm – this could be a high speed fan or one of the commercially available white noise machines sold to help humans sleep. You can even download apps for your smart phone that create white noise. (Check [SimplyNoise.com](#) or [White Noise from TMSoft](#) for two examples.)
- **Play music that is specially designed to reduce anxiety in dogs.** Quite a few are available, such as:
  - [Through a Dog’s Ear](#)
  - [Pet Pause](#)
  - [Pet Acoustics](#)
- **Keep a pheromone diffuser plugged in at all times**, especially in the rooms your dog frequents most often. These products simulate the “appeasing” chemicals secreted by nursing mother dogs, thereby inducing a sense of comfort in dogs who breathe in. There is no odor detectable by humans and nothing toxic the product for your dog. The diffuser simply plugs into an electrical outlet and lasts for approximately 30 days. The same pheromone product is also available in a spray or as a collar worn dog. See the websites for [D.A.P.](#) (Dog Appeasing Pheromone) or [Comfort Zone](#) for more information.



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## 5. Provide a “Safe Spot”

Many dogs seek out a small, out-of-the-way place on their own, and make a beeline for it as soon as a storm approaches. Often this is a bathroom, basement, walk-in closet, underneath a table, or behind a sofa. Interestingly, some dogs seem to derive comfort from lying on or near porcelain surfaces, perhaps because they instinctively know it provides some protection from static electricity. Thus, inside a bathtub or curled around a toilet are common spots thunderphobic dogs will retreat to.

Rather than discourage this behavior, do all you can to take advantage of it. **Build on your dog’s natural instinct to find refuge by creating or enhancing a special safe haven.** Think of it as a “storm bunker” or your dog’s very own “hidey hole.” Ideally, this area should be one without windows or with covered windows. A basement area is often ideal, since there are few if any windows and it stays cooler in the summer. Remove anything in the “safe spot” that could be hazardous if knocked over by a frightened pooch and make sure the area is not so small or confined that the dog could get trapped – thus ending up more scared, rather than less.

Give the dog access to his “safe spot” at all times since a storm may easily come up while you are away. Stock the area with some soft blankets and a favorite toy or two...anything that will provide comfort and positive associations. A radio playing may add additional comfort. Encourage your dog to use it whenever a storm is brewing and see if it makes any difference.

## 6. Use Crates Cautiously

If your dog likes the security of a crate, consider putting one in the “safe spot” or another part of the house, but leave the door open so the dog can go in and out on its own. In general, being confined in a crate with the door closed leads to heightened anxiety in a thunderphobic dog and an attempt to break out. As with any of these options, what works for one dog may not work for another, so you will need to determine your individual dog’s reaction to being crated.

## 7. Try Soundproofing Products

Two crate-type products on the market utilize the concept of soundproofing to offer additional protection from noises generated by thunderstorms, fireworks, or other loud situations.

First is the [Thunderhut](#), made of polyester fabric filled with 1 lb. 9 oz. density sound-deadening foam. It is designed to provide a “dark, quiet den to which your pet can escape.” It comes as either a freestanding unit or crate cover in four sizes; prices range from \$39.99 to \$149.95.

The second product, called a [Quiet Kennel](#), is currently only made in England, so not very available to U.S. dog owners. However, the company does offer to



provide a quote for other locations, so it could be worth investigating. The Quiet Kennel is a pretty unique item, consisting of a fully enclosed (but fully ventilated) small box with a spring-loaded door that the dog can go in and out of independently. The company states that the walls are filled with acoustic soundproof foam, thus

keeping the dog safe from unnecessary “noise pollution.” Pricing is not available from the website but is no doubt on the high side.

Lastly, if you think your dog will tolerate them, you can consider fitting him or her for a pair of [“Mutt Muffs”](#) – yes, they are sound-reducing headphones for dogs! The company sells them primarily for dogs that are exposed to high decibel noise from airplanes, air shows, or the like, but notes they can certainly be used for thunderstorms as well. Reviews from online customers are pretty mixed regarding the product’s efficacy in reducing stress/anxiety during thunderstorms. Again, an option to try but keep your expectations realistic.

## 8. Experiment with Anxiety-Reducing Attire

A significant amount of evidence shows that anxious dogs may derive comfort from the sensation of being “swaddled,” much like a human baby does when wrapped in a blanket. Once again, this technique may or may not work for your dog since responses observed are very individual. Some owners report quite dramatic improvement; others see no real change.

***The [Anxiety Wrap](#) was the first product marketed to help dogs deal with thunderstorms and other anxiety-provoking situations by using this “swaddle” or “maintained pressure” concept.*** It was developed in 2001 by Susan Sharpe APDT, CPDT, a dog trainer with over 25 years of experience. On her website, Susan calls the Anxiety Wrap a “therapeutic hug,” and that is a good way to think of it! It is made of a lightweight, stretchy fabric that fits snugly around the dog’s torso and targets various acupressure points on the dog’s body. It does not interfere with the dog’s potty needs and can be worn for several hours at a time.



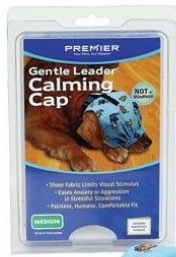
***In 2009, a similar product, called the [Thundershirt](#), became available.***

The Thundershirt uses the same basic concept as the Anxiety Wrap (i.e., providing constant, comforting pressure around the dog’s body), but is made of a heavier fabric. The company’s website provides a wealth of information about ways to properly use the product for various types of situations that cause anxiety in dogs. (See their [Training Center](#) articles.)



At DVGRR, we have used both of these products with thunderphobic dogs in the kennel – at present, we are primarily using the Thundershirt and we also sell them in our Pap’s Place retail store. Feedback from our own use as well as that of our adopters and other Pap’s Place customers shows that – once again – the product works very well for some dogs and has no effect on others. Your best bet is to give either wrap a try and hope that your dog falls into the “works well” category!

***Another form of “attire” that operates on a different principle is the [Calming Cap](#), a soft fabric cap that covers the dog’s eyes but is not a blindfold.*** The dog can still see through the cap but visual stimuli are markedly reduced – resulting in decreased fear and agitation. It can be used in many stressful situations to help a dog feel more relaxed. The efficacy of this product is again variable.



The Calming Cap was originally manufactured by [Premier Pet Products](#) but has been recently discontinued by that company. You can still find it through some online retailers. In addition, DVGRR has a small supply in both Medium and Large sizes that can be borrowed by adopters. The Thundershirt company is now marketing their version of the [Calming Cap](#) as well.

**Also in the category of attire is the [Storm Defender Cape](#), a product developed by a frustrated dog owner with a background in psychology and electrical engineering.**

The Storm Defender Cape operates on the theory that canine thunderstorm phobia is largely related to the uncomfortable static buildup that accompanies a storm. It uses a special metallic lining that discharges a dog's fur and shields him from ongoing static charge buildup, thus reducing his fear of storms and accompanying triggers. While it looks similar to the Anxiety Wrap and Thundershirt, it uses a very different concept to accomplish the same goal – reduced fear and anxiety. The company recommends using the Storm Defender Cape for at least three storms to see the benefit, and offers a full refund if users are dissatisfied.



NOTE: Some owners report that rubbing a dog's fur with a fabric softener dryer sheet can also help to reduce static charge buildup and thereby decrease discomfort and anxiety.

## 9. Try a Natural Supplement or Remedy

Open any dog catalog, walk through the aisles of any pet supply store, or search on the Internet, and you'll find an ever-growing number of herbal, homeopathic, and holistic products all purporting to induce a sense of calm and relaxation for your pet. Navigating through this array of options can be daunting, and it's hard to know how effective they really are. Still, we do recommend at least trying one or more of these products, either on its own or in conjunction with another technique suggested in this article. You may hit on one that really does the trick for your dog, or at minimum takes the edge off so the dog's quality of life during storms is improved.

***Please remember to discuss anything administered orally to your dog with your veterinarian, to be sure it is not contraindicated with anything healthwise affecting your dog.*** Among products to consider (just a partial list):

- [Melatonin](#) – a naturally occurring hormone also used in humans as a sleep aid. We have given melatonin for many years to dogs at Golden Gateway during thunderstorms. It helps some, doesn't help others.
- [Homeopet Storm Stress](#)
- [Ultra-Calm](#) – Dr. Foster and Smith brand
- [Calm Shen](#) – Chinese herb remedy
- [Spirit Essence Storm Soother](#)
- [Rescue Remedy](#) – Flower Essence product
- [OptiBalance Fears and Phobias Formula](#) – Flower Essence product
- [Mellow Out](#)
- [Calming Collar](#) – worn around the dog's neck, filled with soothing herbs

## 10. Get a Prescription Medication from Your Vet

We've listed this at the end as most dog owners seem to consider prescription medication the "last resort" and want to try other suggested treatment or management options first. "I don't want to drug my dog," is a common concern voiced. There is certainly merit to this position since any medication can have side effects and should be used judiciously. ***And yet, many dogs can attain very significant relief with prescription medication, greatly increasing not only their quality of life, but that of their human family members as well.***

In deciding whether to try a prescription medication with your dog, weigh the advantages and the disadvantages (always in consultation with a veterinarian or behavior counselor) and look at the potential impact on that all-important quality of life measure we all want for our dogs. As with all of the techniques listed in this article, medication can be used completely on its own or (more commonly) in conjunction with other techniques as part of an overall management plan for helping your dog handle thunderstorms more effectively.

***There are several medications currently used for thunderstorm phobia in dogs. Which is most appropriate for your dog will depend on his or her overall health, symptoms displayed, and severity of the problem.*** You will also want to take into consideration whether the medication needs to be given immediately preceding a storm (challenging if you are at work full time) or can be given daily on a preventive basis.

We are *not* in favor of using acepromazine, which used to be prescribed quite often and is still sometimes used by less up-to-date veterinarians. An article from the online [Pet Health Care Gazette](#) provides an excellent overview of the problems associated with using "ace" to treat anxiety.

Medications generally considered more appropriate can include alprazolam (Xanax®), diazepam (Valium®), clomipramine (Clomicalm®), or fluoxetine (Prozac® or Reconcile®). We have had quite a few adopters report success with alprazolam and have used that ourselves at Golden Gateway when prescribed for one of the thunderphobic dogs. For those wanting to educate themselves in depth on how various anxiety medications work, an article by Mary Straus called "[Anxiety Medications for Dogs](#)" is an excellent resource.

While a veterinarian must prescribe medication for your dog, keep in mind that your vet may or may not have a lot of experience dealing with canine behavior problems. Should you need the help of a professional, please also consider working with a qualified trainer or behavior counselor, who can guide you along the journey of helping reduce your dog's thunderstorm anxiety.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

[Thunderstorm Phobia in Dogs](#) – from the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT)

[Storm Phobias](#) – Dr. Karen Overall (noted veterinary behaviorist)

[Dogs and Thunderstorms](#) – dog trainer Jolanta Benal

[Fear of Thunderstorms, Fireworks and Noise Phobias](#) – Drs. Foster and Smith Pet Education series

[Thunderstorm Phobia in Dogs](#) – Dr. Nicholas Dodman

[Coping with Thunderstorm Phobia](#) – Victoria Stillwell

[Finding Calm in the Storm](#) – Humane Society of the United States

[Home Consultation for Storm Phobia](#) – video with Dr. Jeff Nichol