

Help for pets suffering from noise phobia

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Dr Quixie Sonntag

The next few months will be filled with festivities. Fireworks will be used in an array of cultural celebrations and people will be going away for the December holiday. During this time, veterinary practices, the SPCA and animal shelters are usually overrun by lost animals. Many cats and dogs are severely injured trying to escape the noise of fireworks. Dr Quixie Sonntag, veterinarian and animal behaviourist at the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Veterinary Science, knows this trend all too well. She calls on all pet owners to act responsibly and ensure their pets are properly cared for.

While many people enjoy the explosions and bright colours of fireworks, they may not realise the terrible effects these can have on cats and dogs. Many domestic animals suffer from noise phobia and it is important for pet owners to realise the severity of this disorder and get the pet to the vet as soon as possible. It is also important for pet owners to pay attention to signs of anxiety and to know what to do if their pet suffers from noise phobia.

Noise phobia is a fear of, and the corresponding stress responses to, loud noises. It is defined as a persistent, excessive and irrational fear response to a noisy situation. Likely triggers include thunderstorms, fireworks, gunshots, loud bird noises and any other loud noises.

Dr Sonntag advises pet owners to pay attention to signs that their pet may suffer from noise phobia and to visit a vet as soon as the signs start. The vet will probably prescribe medication to alleviate the symptoms. Early detection and treatment can prevent the phobia from escalating and ensure that it is effectively managed. Dr Sonntag's advice is based on her expertise as a vet and years of involvement in animal behaviour. She has also attended numerous conferences overseas to extend her practical knowledge.

Over the years, Dr Sonntag has treated several dogs for noise phobia and achieved very good results. Unfortunately, she has also witnessed cases where animals were left untreated. She remembers a case where 'a dog tried to find refuge behind a fridge and electrocuted itself. In another case, a dog got stuck in palisade fencing. Yet another dog cut itself to shreds when it jumped through a glass window trying to escape the noise.'

Signs that your pet may suffer from noise phobia include heavy panting, restlessness, wanting close physical contact with you, shivering and hiding. Cases are categorised according to the severity of the symptoms – mild cases can be treated only when necessary. In severe cases, where the animal is constantly stressed and anticipating a loud noise, long-term treatment and daily medication are required.

Dr Sonntag says that animals respond very well to treatment and there are no significant side-effects. She also says that the earlier treatment is started, the less likely it is that the animal will progress to a state of severe noise phobia.

An additional measure that is very effective in conjunction with prescribed medication is the use of dog appeasing pheromone (DAP). DAP is a synthetic version of a natural pheromone that is secreted from the sebaceous glands between the mammary chains of lactating bitches directly after parturition. It is effective in reducing fear and stress in dogs of all ages in a wide range of situations. DAP products come in the form of collars, sprays and diffusers for the home. They are dog-specific and will therefore not affect other animals.

Noise phobia is not always as apparent in cats as in dogs. Their symptoms often go unnoticed as they tend to hide away, leading their owners to think they are sleeping and are therefore fine. A pheromone product called Feliway is available to treat cats for noise phobia.

Dr Sonntag stresses the importance of creating a safe den where the cat or dog knows it can go when it is scared. This safe space should absorb as much noise as possible – cushions, blankets and curtains will help achieve this. Dr Sonntag says a wooden box or crate with soft furnishings works well. Pheromones can then be sprayed in the safe place to ensure the animal feels as protected as possible during noisy situations.

‘It is important to be mindful of the fact that your pet is afraid and highly stressed. Shouting at it is not going to be effective, and is likely to make the situation worse,’ says Dr Sonntag. As the owner of a pet that suffers from noise phobia, it is important for you to have a reassuring attitude, acknowledge that your pet is afraid and put all the right systems in place to protect it.

If you think you have a pet that suffers from noise phobia, contact the OP Behaviour Clinic on (012) 529 8036.

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