

Health and welfare information about your cat from Vetlexicon Felis.



Fireworks - fear behavior

Firework fear is a common problem in dogs and although it appears to be rare in cats, it is thought that they can often be afraid of fireworks too. Fear behavior in cats is often more subtle (eg retreating and hiding) and may go unnoticed. However, hiding is an adaptive response for cats and allowing them to hide when they are stressed can make them feel better.

It is not surprising that animals are scared of fireworks since they are very loud (up to 150 decibels). Sounds this loud can be physically painful as well as inducing fear. The noise from fireworks also lacks a clear pattern, with the source of the noise not identifiable and sounds occurring in short repeated bursts - the unpredictable nature of the sounds can make even normal animals react fearfully. Animals may become more sensitive with repeated exposures to the noise. In some animals a true phobia exists and these animals cannot get worse with time since they are always fully reactive to the noise.

What is a fireworks fear?

Problems with noises are grouped under the general term of noise sensitivities. A sensitivity is an extreme reaction that does not return to normal baseline levels or reduces more slowly than a standard response would, but which does not rise to the level of a phobia. Noise sensitivity generally occurs in response to loud and sudden noises such as thunder, fireworks, gunshots, etc. Animals exposed to such noises may show anxiety or fear responses.

Fear can be difficult to gauge in animals and is based on observation of body postures. A fearful animal will show an increase in heart rate, cower, and possibly urinate and defecate in a stressful circumstance. On the other hand, pets may show withdrawal behavior, being less active and hiding.

Fleeing, hiding and heightened reactivity are instinctive responses during which the animal may view approaches (including from their owner) as potential threats and so react aggressively when they would not otherwise do so. The likelihood of an animal perceiving something as a threat, and how it responds to that threat, depends on its genetic make-up and the stimulus from the environment. Your pet may learn which events predict the future onset of the noise that frightens and start to react to these events. This causes them to show fear responses earlier with repeated exposure. In phobic animals the fear response becomes extreme.

Why does my pet have a fear of fireworks?

Fear is a normal reaction in many situations. Pets, when they are frightened, may become aggressive (fight reaction), run away (flight), stay still (freeze), or display appeasement or attention seeking behaviors (jumping up, licking, pawing at owner). Fear can become self-reinforcing and rather than helping your pet to learn that he or she can survive multiple exposures, they can actually become sensitized to the fearful stimulus.

Sometimes fear results from a traumatic experience related to exposure to the noise, in other cases there are less direct associations that become learned, for example being told off when they react. In some cases, the continuous, unpredictable repetition of sudden loud noises favors the development of the sensitivity.

Fearful responses can also result from any significant sounds that the pet has not encountered during its early development.

It is important to remember that all animals should be watched for untoward reactions to noise and any reactions that do not diminish on a second exposure should be evaluated. Early treatment of these is more likely to have a favorable outcome. Animals may be at particular risk of developing noise sensitivity if there are other stress-related behavior problems or some form of physical disease, since their unease may decrease their level of tolerance to any unpleasant event.

Finally, be aware that your behavior can influence your pet's response as well. It is essential to stay calm at all times.

What can be done to help my pet?

To help your pet you should immediately adopt measures to avoid further worsening of the condition in conjunction with starting treatment.

Restriction of the problem

There are some methods to help your pet in the short term, to prevent worsening of the problem until treatment can be affected. These routines will need to be continued during the specific therapy, and some of them should become part of the normal routine with your pet (eg avoiding involuntary reinforcements).

Avoid fireworks

If your pet is afraid of fireworks, you should try to avoid exposure to this situation. Being exposed to the cause of our fears with no chance of escaping can be very traumatic and it is likely that the problem will get worse. For this reason try to keep your pet inside the house if you know that fireworks are likely to be let off at a certain time - if your cat is allowed outside call him back before fireworks start.

Avoid involuntary reinforcement or punishment

Your behavior can also influence your pet. If you try to comfort or soothe your pet, you may involuntarily encourage fearful behavior. On the other hand, punishment may increase your pet's fear. Ideally you should try to ignore your animal, once you have provided him with a secure place to stay. If however, it is too hard for you to ignore your pet when he is afraid, you can try to provide some distraction. Try to be jolly and engage yourself in some activity that is very likely to interest your pet. Use a jolly voice and try to catch the interest of your pet without directly addressing him, you can then reward him after he has joined you and

keep him engaged by playing games. The idea is that he chooses to join you without any direct encouragement from you, since this means he has changed his emotional response.

Mask the noise

During the firework sounds keep your pet in a room with the curtains and blinds shut or a windowless room. You can try to mask the external sounds by providing plenty of background noise at a fairly high volume (although you should be careful if your pet is uncomfortable with loud noise). Compositions which have slow tempos and less complex arrangements (such as instrumental solos) can have a calming effect on animals.

Provide a safe haven

The safe haven is simply an area, a rug, or a bed where your pet can feel safe and secure. You should appreciate that it is not a bolt hole where your pet tries to hide until the fearful event is passed. It is rather a place where your animal spontaneously decides to go because it feels good, and is something that helps your pet to successfully cope with his fears. For this reason, the safe haven should be a confined area, with no previous negative experiences (eg if your pet tends to hide in one corner of the room, you can choose the same room but set the safe haven in a different corner). You will need to build up several positive experiences associated with the safe haven in advance of any risk period. You can choose a new bed and put it in a crate (but only if you are sure that your pet likes to rest in crates). You may want to cover the crate with a blanket or place it under a table (this depends on your pet's preferences for small confined places). You can place the new bed on a raised position for cats. In any case, the safe haven should be located away from windows.

Once you have the safe haven set up, you can teach your pet to use it. Initially you may encourage your pet to go into the safe haven by luring him with toys or some food treats. Your pet's meals can also be given here. You can also hide toys and treats in the safe haven for your pet to find there (this will encourage him to visit the place when you are not around). You can also give chews or food toys for your pet to work on when it is there. Every time you see your pet in the safe haven he should be allowed to relax there with treats tossed over to him if you like, but no direct contact. With time you may make these additional rewards less frequent, since the place itself has become an area for relaxation. It is important that potentially unpleasant events are never associated with the safe haven; therefore, should you need, for example, to give medication it is important that you do it elsewhere. In the same way, if children or other animals bother your pet, you will need to teach them to respect this area or keep them at a distance using baby gates or doors flaps. The idea is that this is a place where your pet can be in control. Placing the safe haven in the room least exposed to the sounds, will also help your pet to cope.

Pheromones

Pheromone therapy has proved useful for management of some behavioral problems as part of a behavior modification program in conjunction with counter-conditioning. Your veterinarian may suggest that you consider this as part of the program of control of your pet's fears.

Diet and supplements

There are some veterinary diets and some specific nutraceuticals which may be used to help your pet feel generally more calm. The principle behind these products is that they contain chemicals which have a natural calming effect on pets. Although they are not medications, always use them under your veterinarian's guidance, especially if your pet needs specific diets or attention regarding food intake because of medical conditions.

There is no evidence that homeopathic remedies have a specific positive effect on firework related problems, and their use might delay the use of more effective interventions, so they should not be considered harmless. If you choose to give these products to your pet, it is important that you always use them under your veterinarian's direction. Indeed, these substances may have severe effects on your pet's health if not appropriately utilized.

Medications

For some pets with a severe fear the only immediate solution is a short course of calming medication at the time the noise is likely to happen. These drugs should be given before your pet becomes upset for maximum efficacy, ie before the feared event starts. You should not be concerned about giving the medication when you are not sure whether the noise will occur or not, as it is better for your pet to have taken the medication on a false alarm than for him to experience another traumatic cycle of events without medication. Always discuss medication issues with your veterinarian and only use treatment under their guidance. If your pet has a particular problem your veterinarian may wish to refer you to someone who specializes in treating behavioral problems for further advice.

Resolution of the problem

While the previous advice is very important to avoid worsening of the problem, they will not bring a resolution on their own as your pet will still be afraid whenever there are fireworks. Also, their fear may put your pet at risk of developing other behavior problems and the stress can have a negative impact on their physical health. Therefore you will need to do something to make this fear go away.

Behavior modification

Treatment for fireworks fear is mainly based on a type of behavior modification called desensitization and counter-conditioning. Desensitization is the process of teaching your pet

to be less sensitive to sudden loud noises. Counter-conditioning means to swap the fear response with a new feeling that is not compatible with the fear (eg play or the pleasure of eating food). The basic principle is to let your animal experience the noises in a situation where he does not feel afraid, and at a volume that does not cause fear (this can be so low at the beginning, that you cannot hear anything yourself). He is then rewarded for being relaxed. Once your pet gets used to this process the level of noise is gradually increased, but only to a level where he still feels confident. If he is ever afraid of the noise the level is reduced until he feels safe again. Ending each lesson in such a successful way and avoiding making your pet feel scared is a critical point - behavior modification cannot occur if your pet is distressed and in most cases medication to calm the pet is required to facilitate the acquisition of new behaviors. Training sessions should always be short and regular to help get a positive outcome.

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Medications

In some animals the fear of fireworks is so marked that pets may need medication to calm them so that they are able to learn during the behavior treatment. These drugs are not intended to be used in the long term, they just help your pet to cope while you carry on the behavior modification. Your veterinarian will advise you on the best treatment for your pet and you should not give your pet any medication without consulting your veterinarian.

Having a noise sensitivity is no fun for your pet and can be very distressing for you. Fears can get worse with time and they will not often go away unless you do something about it. In the first instance consult your veterinarian who may refer you to a specialist for further advice.

Additional comments

Remember that there are strategies which help prevent the problem.

Selection of your pet

Selection is the first step involved in the prevention of behavioral problems. Some traits of temperament are inherited, but parents can also influence their offspring through their own

behavior. If you have any reason to think that your kitten is at particular risk of developing a noise phobia you should contact your veterinarian immediately if they show any sign of noise sensitivity.

Stimulation during early life

As said, it is important that, during their early life, pets are exposed to the stimuli that they will encounter later in life. It is important that these first experiences are positive, so that it is less likely that future negative experiences leave a strong effect on your pet.

Nevertheless, given the other features of firework parties you should not try to take your pet to a firework display as the noise can be too loud and the other experiences too traumatic for your pet.



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