



# Guiding Dogs to H.E.A.R

*A 30-day program may Help Ease Aversive Responses to thunderstorms and fireworks*

By Jamie Gregory, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA

FEATURE

Spring showers bringing May flowers, summertime picnics, parades, and Fourth of July celebrations are all things to look forward to, unless you have a dog that suffers from noise anxiety or noise phobia, an excessive fear of a sound that results in the dog attempting to avoid or escape the noise. Many dogs run away during the days leading up to the Fourth of July due to severe noise anxiety, making the fifth of July the busiest day of the year at shelters. And those are the lucky ones as other dogs are injured or even killed trying to escape. Some dogs are so frightened they become destructive as they try to escape the scary noise.

It is estimated that one in three dogs have some sort of noise anxiety, according to the December 2018 Harris Poll: Custom Motion Sickness and Noise Aversion Omnibus Pet Owner Quantitative Research Report. Most of the time they suffer through it year after year, especially during storms and fireworks. Pet parents often do not know what to do about noise anxiety. Many will head to their veterinarian for a refill on their dog's anxiety medication and think there is nothing else they can do. Some may be aware of behavior consultants, but it is often just not in the budget. There are things we can do to help our dogs. The HEAR program is meant to Help Ease Aversive Responses by educating owners and veterinary professionals on how to manage, prevent, reduce, and/or eliminate noise fears.

I believe that educating ourselves on why dogs do what they do can help us be more understanding and sympathetic. Although dogs have been studying human behavior for thousands of years, the study of canine behavior is relatively new. We owe it to our canine family members to get to know them a bit better. Below, we will first learn about a dog's fear response, how they learn, and how these work together to contribute to the development of noise fear. Next, I will provide step-by-step guides using the HEAR program to teach you how to address noise fear in your dog.

**A Dog's Fear Response**

When your dog hears a scary noise, a fear response is initiated in the brain. The fear response comes from the hindbrain and it overrides the prefrontal cortex, or the part of the brain that is responsible for reasoning and decision making. The result is the "fight or flight" response. When the fight or flight response is activated, your dog will attempt to avoid or escape the sound to protect itself. When the hindbrain is activated, the only goal is survival.

When dogs feel like their lives are in danger, their brains release chemicals to help them respond to the perceived danger. Once this happens, the dogs can become over-aroused or over-threshold; in other



words, those dogs now have an overwhelming, uncontrollable sense of fear. They will start manifesting outward signs that they are in turmoil. This includes pacing, shaking, panting, barking, inability to relax, lack of appetite, drooling, and even loss of control of bowels. When dogs are over-threshold, they are not able to learn.

For thunderstorms, our dogs know it is coming. They associate environmental changes like rain, dark clouds, and wind to be the predictors of the impending storm. Some scientists believe changes in barometric pressure may cause the dog pain. We also know dogs' sense of hearing is much better than ours. Dogs can hear sounds four times further away than humans. When we think a boom of thunder or fireworks are loud, just remember those sounds are amplified for our poor dogs.

#### How Do Dogs Learn?

**Dogs learn by association.** That is, they learn by attaching meaning to sights and sounds. They either have a positive, negative, or neutral emotional response to particular events, sights, or sounds. We want to change the dogs' emotional responses to scary noises (which in turn manifests as unwanted behaviors) by associating them with something the dogs view as positive.

Consider this example: I am afraid of snakes. If I were to go to a psychologist to work on my fear of snakes, I doubt they would cover my mouth if I scream or tell me to just "suck it up" and stop being afraid. That would not help my fear of snakes; in fact, it might make me more fearful, and now I do not like the

psychologist! What if they showed me pictures of snakes from a distance? What if they gave me one hundred dollars each time I saw a snake? In that case, I would eventually look forward to seeing snakes.

**Dogs are masters at building associations.** They do it all day every day. For example, when you get the leash out, your dog may get excited in anticipation of a walk. That is a positive association to the leash. If your dog sees you put your shoes on or grab your coat, sometimes they will go hide or get anxious because they associate those things with you leaving. That is a negative association dogs have built to the shoes and coat.

The inability to learn during the fear response is the reason it is so important to gradually expose dogs to noises so they can learn that scary noises are not threats to their lives. When you think ahead and use the following strategies to prepare your own dog for fearful events, you can help ease the fear and anxiety from common triggers like thunderstorms and fireworks.

#### Using Counterconditioning and Desensitization to Decrease Fear of Noises

In the following steps, we are using both counterconditioning and desensitization to decrease fear of noises. With counterconditioning, you will be undoing the learned associations between noise and the fear response and replacing them with new ones. With desensitization, we will gradually expose dogs to the sounds that cause anxiety to manage, prevent, reduce, or eliminate the outward manifestations (the unwanted behaviors).

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#### The HEAR Program

HEAR is a step-by-step program that can be done by anyone. It is easy and fun for the pet parents and their dogs. If you follow these steps and practice regularly, you can manage, prevent, reduce, or eliminate the amount of fear dogs have during scary noise events.

When we are dealing with anxiety, we often need to use various methods and layers to our approach in helping our dogs. It may be one or two things that I am going to share with you that will work, or you may need to implement them all. All dogs are different, and all situations are different. I recommend working on each step daily over a 30-day period so the dog has time to feel comfortable.

**Step 1: Create a Safe Place.** It is important to have a safe place you can go with your dog so that they cannot see the flash of lightning or the fireworks. For instance, use a closet or bathroom without windows. Put a familiar dog bed or blanket in that space so the dog feels more comfortable. Using a crate in this area is only recommended if your dog is very comfortable in the crate. Some dogs may retreat to their crate because it makes them feel less anxious and gives them a sense of security. Other dogs may feel trapped and more anxious if confined to a crate. For many dogs when the fight or flight response kicks in, they will try to escape from the crate, and in the process get injured. Know your dog and do what works best for them.

**Trail to a Treasure game:** For this game, I make a trail of medium value treats spaced one foot apart leading to the safe place. When the dog gets to the safe place, there is a "treasure" waiting for them: this could be a special stuffed Kong, a pile of chicken, a lick bowl with peanut butter, or anything your dog would love. Only use this special "treasure" in this spot. Once your dog knows the game, you can space the treats on the trail several feet apart and expand the trail.

When you're practicing, make this a fun time for your dog. Go into this space and play with a toy or do some tricks. I do not recommend just putting your dog in this space and leaving him alone. You need to work on creating a positive association with this

space. After a few days of fun in this space, you can start playing a game with your dog. You can name the space and say, "Go to your space" or "go to the closet." Let them go to the space on their own. They will want to go because it is a fun place where good things happen and treasures await.

**Step 2: Play Similar Sounds at Lower Volumes.** Google "thunderstorm" or "firework" sounds and play these with the volume very low. If your dog is showing any signs of anxiety, it is too loud. Play this while your dog is eating or playing. Slowly increase the volume over time. If your dog at any time shows anxiety, you went too far, too fast. We are trying to desensitize the dog to the sound. We cannot simulate a storm because we cannot add lighting and the rumbling feeling. The same holds true for fireworks. However, playing these sounds will help the dog get used to the noise so it no longer has a particular meaning. It is not invoking a fear response anymore; it is just background noise.

**Step 3: Utilize Your Dog's Strong Sense of Smell.** Smell is your dog's strongest sense. Their sense of smell is 10,000 to 100,000 times greater than ours. The part of their brains that is dedicated to smell is 40 times larger than the part in a human brain dedicated to smell. During storms and fireworks, we want to take the focus off the eyes and ears and put it on smell.

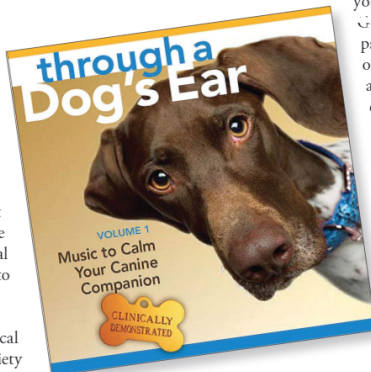
There is a Dog Appeasing Pheromone (DAP) called Adaptil. It comes in a collar, a spray, and a diffuser you plug into the wall. You can also try using lavender essential oil. Both can help calm dogs. To apply, put a few drops of lavender oil on their muzzles. The Adaptil depends on which form you get; I personally like the spray because you can use it anywhere and spray it on a bed or a bandana. Doing this alone may not improve anxiety for your dog, but when using these scents along with the other tips, you should see less stress in your dog. Again, it is important to use these tools with some frequency, so your dog does not begin associating them with the scary event.

**Step 4: Utilize Your Dog's Sense of Touch.** Again, we want to take the focus off the ears and eyes, this time using touch. Use a thunder

jacket for your dog. It is a snug-fitting jacket that can have a calming effect on dogs. To get your dog comfortable with this, start putting it on slowly so it is not causing any stress for your dog. Let your dog eat, play and sleep in this jacket. We are not going to just slap this on before a storm or on the Fourth of July. Why? Yep, you guessed it. Because we do not want your dog to associate the jacket with whatever causes the anxiety.

**Step 5: Play Calming Music.**

We want to try drowning out the sound of the fireworks or thunder with a more peaceful sound. There is calming music made for dogs called *Through A Dog's Ear*. You can look it up online or search calming dog music on YouTube and play it for your dog while they are relaxing or sleeping. Get them used to this music so that when we combine all these steps during an actual anxiety-provoking event, they are used to it and associate it with relaxing.



**Step 6: Exercise.** Mental and physical stimulation are critical to reducing anxiety and stress. Making sure your dog is given opportunities to drain some of that energy before the scary event happens will help them remain more relaxed.

**Other Options**

**Seek Behavioral Support.** If you need help implementing these steps or are continuing to see anxiety despite trying these recommendations, seek the help of a certified behavior consultant or a dog trainer who has experience and qualifications to work with these types of behaviors.

**Medication.** There are many anxiety supplements or medications available over the counter or by prescription from your veterinarian. Talk to your vet to determine the best option for your dog. Many owners do not like the idea of medicating their dogs, but it can be very helpful for a dog that is suffering. Medication along with behavior modification can help manage, prevent, reduce or eliminate the anxiety your dog feels during these events.

**Important Considerations When Implementing HEAR Program Steps**

**Management.** The key to a successful behavior modification plan is management. Management is setting up your dog's environment to prevent the unwanted behaviors from happening. In this case, this means using the safe place to prevent the dog from seeing and hearing thunder and fireworks.

**Watch Your Dog's Cues.** Let your dog drive this process. Pay close attention to their behavior as they are telling you something. If

they show the slightest sign of anxiety or fear, you have gone too far, too fast and you need to take it back a step. For instance, if your dog backs away or stops taking treats, they are over-threshold and learning cannot take place.

**Use High Value Rewards.** Using high value treats will keep your dog more interested and engaged. Going back to my snake analogy: if the psychologist gave me pennies instead of one-hundred-dollar bills for looking at snakes, I would have no interest in engaging. You are using the treat to replace a negative association or create a positive new association. For instance, if the dog gets a treasure in the safe place, they will develop a positive association with that place. If every time a storm is coming they get to go to their safe place, they begin to have a positive association to the storm. Using treats and other positive reinforcers to build these associations is how this program works.

**Practice.** If you follow the 30-day HEAR program, you will have a dog that is less reactive, less anxious and less fearful during noise events, but you need to implement these steps periodically throughout the year to build your dog's confidence. Training your dog will strengthen your bond and provide them with good mental and physical stimulation.

**Provide Comfort When Your Dog is Afraid.** I believe providing comfort and reassurance to your dog when they are afraid is appropriate and can be helpful. That being said, our canine companions do pick up on our emotions and mirror our moods, so it is very important to stay calm and relaxed. If we are calm, we are helping the dog understand that there is no real danger. If we show signs of stress, this will reassure the dog there is reason to panic.

**No Noise Anxiety?** If you have a puppy or a dog that does not currently have noise anxiety, it is still a good idea to practice these steps so you can avoid the development of noise anxiety and future behavior problems.

**What Not to Do**

Never take your dog to a fireworks display or leave them outside alone during fireworks or a thunderstorm. If possible, stay home with them and use the above strategies.

**Punishment.** When punishment is used in training, you are focusing on the unwanted behavior. Punishment will damage the relationship between you and your dog. Your dog will begin

to fear you, not trust or respect you. Anxiety and fear are not voluntary; therefore you cannot punish a dog for being afraid and expect it to decrease the unwanted behaviors. The fact is, it will increase them. With fear-free, positive-based training, you are focusing on the behavior you want and rewarding that. Using positive training, you will modify the behavior and strengthen the bond between you and your dog. A good behavior consultant will not use punishment to change behavior.

**How to Implement HEAR Program Steps:**

We will implement the above steps in the following stages. PIRR, or Prepare, Introduce, Reinforce and Repeat. You will start low and slow and work your way up. Counterconditioning and desensitization should always be approached this way so we can keep the dog under-threshold. I have broken the stages down into a 30-day program, which if done correctly, can help your dog feel less anxious about the noises that once caused fear and distress. It is not going to require a big time commitment each day. If you can devote 10 minutes a day for 30 days, you can be successful.



*Jamie Gregory has been training dogs for more than 20 years. She is a Certified Behavior Consultant (CBCC-KA Canine), a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT-KA), a published author, and was nominated in the Behavior/Training magazine article category in the 2020 Dog Writers Association of America writing competition. Jamie is a positive, fear-free, reward-based trainer. She has her own Indiana-based dog training center, but finds it is more beneficial to work with the dogs and owners in their own environment. Her passion is educating owners on how dogs learn, how dogs communicate, how owners can effectively communicate with their dogs, and how to build a bond between them using a fear-free methodology. She created the Help Ease Aversive Responses (H.E.A.R.) program. For more information about the HEAR program that includes videos and a day-by-day guide on how to implement it at home, visit [www.jamiesdogtraining.com](http://www.jamiesdogtraining.com).*

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