

A close-up profile of a dog's head, likely a Jack Russell Terrier, looking upwards. The dog has white fur with brown patches on its face and ears. It is wearing a black collar with a silver buckle. The background is a dark night sky filled with colorful fireworks in shades of blue, red, green, and yellow. The fireworks are exploding in various patterns, creating a vibrant and dynamic scene. The overall mood is festive and celebratory.

PREPARING YOUR PET FOR FIREWORK SEASON

Caroline Clark

Introduction

Every year, millions of pets suffer from fear and anxiety because of the sudden loud noises and bright flashing lights of fireworks around Bonfire Night and New Year. In order to keep stress to a minimum, we should be preparing our pets as early as possible.

This E-Book provides tips and management techniques for helping our pets and includes a checklist that can be used right up to the day of the firework event. I also give information on how to provide longer-term treatment solutions.

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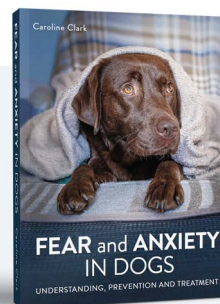
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About the Author



Caroline Clark is a registered veterinary nurse (RVN) with over forty years of experience working with and helping pets. Caroline is also registered clinical animal behaviour counsellor achieving her post graduate

diploma in companion animal behaviour counselling at Southampton University in 2006, where she studied under some of the world's leading authorities in the field. Caroline is a regular contributor to veterinary journals and a frequent speaker at animal behaviour conferences. She also appeared as the behaviour expert in the Channel 4 TV series, Embarrassing Pets.



My book Fear and Anxiety in Dogs looks at understanding, preventing and ultimately treating common behavioural issues found in pet dogs, with the help of real-life case studies and illustrated step-by-step training guides.

Covering a range of issues, such as fear of noises, reactivity towards other dogs and people, separation anxiety and trips to the vets, this fully illustrated book is suitable for concerned dog owners, anyone working with dogs in a professional capacity or those with a genuine interest in canine behaviour.

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Signs of Fear and Distress

Some of the signs of fear and distress include:

Dogs

- 🐾 Trembling and shaking
- 🐾 Muscle tension in face and body
- 🐾 Following owners
- 🐾 Excessive barking and whining
- 🐾 Covering and hiding (Pic. 1)
- 🐾 Trying to run away
- 🐾 House-soiling
- 🐾 Pacing and panting
- 🐾 Refusing to eat
- 🐾 Destructive behaviour (e.g. chewing, digging)

Cats

- 🐾 Covering and hiding (Pic. 2)
- 🐾 Tension in the face and body
- 🐾 Dilated pupils (wide eyes)
- 🐾 Trying to run away
- 🐾 Going to the toilet in the house, instead of outside or in their litter tray
- 🐾 Refusing to eat
- 🐾 Seeking an elevated location

Rabbits (and other small mammals)

- 🐾 Stamping hind feet (rabbits)
- 🐾 Staying motionless
- 🐾 Hiding
- 🐾 Trying to escape/burrow



Pic.1. Signs of fear and distress include hiding (note tension in the ears)



Pic. 2. Cats often hide in response to something frightening (Photo by Melanie Von Gunten, Pixabay)

Managing the Environment

Create a den as a safe haven well ahead of the event

Provided it is safe, this should be in a place that your pet usually retreats to at times of distress. Commonly, for dogs, this is under a piece of furniture but an open crate may be favoured. Enhance the area by draping a heavy blanket over the sides to deaden the sound and provide blankets and towels inside it for digging and hiding under.

Cats often like to hide in an elevated location so putting a box or igloo on top of furniture or shelves can help them feel secure. Cat towers with integrated retreats and upturned cardboard boxes with entrance cut-outs can provide safety zones.

Ahead of the event, begin setting up food trails or scent games and place activity feeders in and around the den to encourage positive associations with the location.

For outdoor rabbits and other small mammals, make sure you bring the hutch indoors (e.g. house or shed). Place a heavy blanket/cover around it to deaden the sound and to prevent them seeing the flashing lights.

In the wild small mammals would go underground so tunnels and other cosy hiding places will help. (Pic. 3) Placing food under boxes and inside tunnels will encourage them there.



Pic. 3. Provide dens and places to retreat to for all animals (Photo by Sharon Grobelaar, Pixabay)

Taking cover is a coping strategy so avoid pulling your pet out or handling them too much. Remember that they will be feeling extremely frightened so they might bite or scratch as a fear response.

Masking the Sound

For dogs, cats and other indoor pets, having the TV on a little louder than normal or playing background music can help to mask outside noise. A reggae beat, rather than loud rock or heavy metal genres, are usually the best types of music to mask firework sounds but first, be absolutely certain that the music itself doesn't scare your pet. There is some evidence that classical music can have a calming effect on pets so that might also be worth trying.

White noise has been used successfully for some animals and these sound effects are available as downloads.

Heavy black out curtains, placed underneath regular curtains, can help absorb sound and light.

Mutt Muffs (ear defenders) or hoodies (Pic.4) are tolerated by some dogs and these can help muffle noise although dogs must be trained to wear them well in advance of the event.



Pic 4. Hoodies can help muffle sound but training must be given beforehand

Scent and Pheromones

Adaptil is a synthetic copy of the dog appeasing pheromone. This pheromone is emitted by bitches when they are suckling puppies. It has been shown to

induce calmness and aid security. Some research has suggested that using it in the location of a den increases the likelihood of a dog going there.

Feliway Classic, another pheromone product, has been shown to help cats cope during a challenging event and increases security in the home so this might help reduce distress.

Herbal scents have been shown to help reduce stress in a range of mammals. Pet Remedy is a product that has gained positive reviews, particularly for rabbits. It contains valerian, vetiver and sweet basil.

It's advisable to begin using these products at least a week before and throughout the firework season. However, these are very much part of a plan to help your pet cope better in combination with other strategies so they won't provide a miraculous cure!

Interacting With Your Pet

Providing Reassurance

Whilst stress often results in escape and hiding behaviours, some animals (especially dogs) will seek the company of their owner. In this case, do provide some reassurance. Ignoring them is likely to cause them distress. Just make sure you monitor them to assess the right level of support is given. For example, some dogs respond better to being jollied along.

Loud, low frequency sounds are difficult for cats to localise, so they tend to hide and keep very still until the threat passes. Cats picked up at this time can exhibit a panic response and inflict serious injuries so leave them alone until they are calm and no longer distressed.

The same applies for small mammals, especially prey animals such as rabbits and guinea pigs.

Play and Interactive Games

Play can be a useful distraction for some cats and dogs but don't force them if they prefer not to engage with you. Rotating toys to prevent boredom can help, especially for cats.

Interactive feeders can provide another source of distraction for all species (Pic. 5). Fill them up with tasty food and their favourite treats – making sure that they are just the right level of difficulty.



Pic. 5. Interactive feeders are a good source of distraction

Touch and Pressure

Touch can be very reassuring and certain types of pressure, applied to certain sites in the body, have been shown to help reduce anxiety. Care should be taken with prey animals as this might induce fear and cats can resent too much hands on.

Touch is a positive, animal-friendly approach to training and calming animals. It uses a combination of specific touches, tools and leading exercises to increase confidence, self-awareness, mental and physical balance. Simple exercises and massage techniques can be learned quickly but more specific help is available through properly trained practitioners (which can form part of a long-term plan).

Body-wraps (Pic. 6) and thunder-shirts are thought to work in a similar way to touch. The idea is that the snug fitting garment provides a sense of security, similar to the swaddling effect that a baby gains from being wrapped in a blanket. Also, it is thought that the pressure on specific acupressure points may help. They are more commonly used in dogs because prey animals often find them frightening and cats tend to be less tolerant of them.

The most important thing to remember is that these should never be used without training your dog



Pic. 6. Body-wraps are applied to specific areas of the body to help ease stress (learning the technique and training your dog must be carried out beforehand)

beforehand. This should be done in such a way that positive associations can be made with them. Also, some dogs will freeze and become very still as a response to wearing them. This is known as **shut down** and should not be confused with a calming effect. In fact it is the opposite and is a sign that your dog is distressed.

Never Punish

Never scold or punish your pets. It's not their fault they're scared and punishment adds to their anxiety. Remember that fear can lead to aggression. If that is the case, seek help from a suitably qualified behaviourist as soon as you can for appropriate advice.

Think about your own emotional state

It is true that our behaviour can affect our pets too. This is especially the case if we are closely bonded to them. They can recognise changes in our body-language and research has shown that when we are

stressed, dogs can detect the changes to our scent. Therefore, try to stay calm yourself. If you do get anxious, try some deep breathing techniques, have a bath in relaxing aromatherapy oils beforehand or choose any of the other techniques that you know work for you.

Diet and Medication

Diet

For dogs and cats, there are some non-prescription diets that are medicated with calming ingredients already in them. Speak to your vet about whether these are suitable for your pet.

For dogs, making a stodgy carbohydrate rich meal about an hour or two prior to the event can make them more sleepy and so less reactive. This can be achieved by adding some well-cooked pasta or cooked potato in to their normal feed (as long as they don't have any food intolerances).

Natural Medication

Natural remedies can be really useful in helping reduce fear and some may have a place as part of a balanced approach. For example, studies suggest that alpha-casozepine (Zylkene), the natural protein found in mammalian milk, can help reduce anxiety. Vitamin B6, L-theanine, omega 3 fatty acids, skullcap, valerian and Bach Flower Remedies (suitable for pets) are just some of the other natural ingredients that have been said to help.

But just because it is natural doesn't mean it is safe. Some products can interfere with other prescribed medication (e.g. St John's Wort) and certain manufacturers may not have sourced their ingredients safely. The take home message is to check with your veterinarian before using anything that you are unsure about.

Prescription Medication

Prescription drugs may be required for some animals with more severe fears or phobias. Some drugs that

were once popular, such as sedatives or tranquillisers, are no longer used because all they do is prevent an animal from being able to respond and they don't reduce their fear. We have now found out that, in the long run, these types of drug can make them worse so they should be avoided.

Fortunately, there are products licensed for use with firework phobias that may help to reduce anxiety without just sedating pets. Speak to your vet about whether any of these are appropriate for your pet.

Long-Term Treatment

Desensitisation and Counter-conditioning (DS/CC) Training

These are training techniques that can help as part of a long-term plan but should only begin after the festivities are well and truly over.

The idea is to desensitise your pet to the sound of fireworks by playing good quality sound effects (at a very low volume) whilst your pet is doing something that they find pleasant. That might include whilst they are eating something really tasty, whilst being petted or during training sessions when you're supplying them with treats. The sound effect should be realistic and this can be achieved by using a good sound system. Importantly, it must not be too loud. Remember that animals have much better hearing than us. Start at a volume you can barely hear and GRADUALLY increase the sound.

As well as during the training sessions above, you can also counter-condition your pet to noises by always carrying some of their favourite treats in your pocket or a bum-bag. Whenever there is any firework noise dispense treats in abundance. Don't ask for any particular behaviour but do save these special treats only for those noises.

DS and CC shouldn't be rushed and it may take weeks and months before your pet is able to cope with a louder sound effect. If your pet shows any signs of fear, go back to the volume setting where they were comfortable and proceed more slowly.

This same technique (slow, gradual introductions)

can be used to help dogs get used to wearing muff mutts, hoodies, thunder-shirts and body-wraps.

Performing desensitisation/counter-conditioning can be difficult and there is a real risk of frightening a dog further so getting help from a professional trainer or behaviourist is advisable.

Behaviour Counselling

Seeking help from a suitably qualified and registered/certified animal behaviourist is worth considering. This is especially so for animals that suffer with phobias or general fear and anxiety throughout the year. Here are a few links to help you find a qualified behaviourist:

ABTC register of trainers and behaviourists:
www.abtc.org.uk/practitioners/

APBC register of registered behaviourists and useful handouts and training guides:
www.apbc.org.uk

Useful Resources

Sound Therapy for Pets
www.dogstrust.org.uk/dog-advice/understanding-your-dog/sound-therapy-for-pets

Systematic Desensitisation and Counter-conditioning techniques for dogs:
www.petcourses.co.uk/free-resources/

Do you want to learn more about Canine or Feline Fear and Anxiety?

I have written a range of courses on the subject of pet anxiety, fear and aggression. These range from short webinars suitable for the pet owner to more advanced courses aimed at pet professionals.

For more information and to view all my courses and webinars visit:
www.petcourses.co.uk

Checklist

Here is a checklist that can be used on the day of the event to help serve as a reminder.

Dogs & Cats

Have you...

- Microchipped your pet?
This is a legal requirement in dogs but can help relocate pets if they run away or manage to escape.
- Walked the dog and given it a good run to tire him/her out?
- Given the cat an opportunity to go out earlier in the day?
- Provided a litter tray in a private location indoors?
- Fed your dog a carbohydrate rich meal 1-2 hours beforehand?
- Made a den accessible and is it cosy?
- Got the pheromones or calming scents installed?
- Are doors, windows, cat and dog flaps closed and locked?
- Given the medication (as directed)?
- Drawn the curtains?
- Got some playlists ready (music, white-noise)?
- Left boxes, piles of towels, blankets and other hide-outs available?
- Prepared a range of tasty treats
- Got toys and interactive feeders loaded and ready?
- Made sure you feel calm too?

Rabbits & Small Mammals

Have you...

- Moved hutches and pens inside or into a car-free garage or shed?
- Covered hutches, cages and pens with thick blankets, so they're more sound-proofed (but still allow ventilation)?
- Moved smaller pets' cages away from windows and doors?
- Provided bedding, boxes, tunnels etc. as hiding place?
- Got interactive feeders and enriched feeding devices ready?
- Prepared calming preparations? (e.g. Pet Remedy)