

When Stormy Weather Spells Trouble

by Becky LaBrum

Springtime in Central Texas means longer, warmer days, grass turning green again, trees coming into bloom—and rainier, more unsettled weather. And for storm-phobic Golden Retrievers and their owners, those thunderstorms can make for a stressful season. Experts still aren't sure just what it is about storms that some dogs find so terrifying. Noise is definitely a factor, but since not all dogs who are frightened of thunder are equally perturbed by other loud noises, it's possible that they are also reacting to sudden changes in air pressure or to electrical charges in the atmosphere.

Many dogs couldn't care less about storms, and others get just moderately anxious. Tucker, our black Lab, is one of these; we call him our Dog Barometer, as he can detect incoming storms long before there's even a cloud in the sky. At the first hint of trouble, he becomes moochy and clingy, following me from room to room. As the storm draws in, he begins to pant, pace, drool, tremble, and hunt for the smallest possible hiding place; he'll squeeze behind the sofa, try to crush himself into the gap between toilet and bathtub, or disappear into the back of a walk-in closet.

And then there's the severely phobic dog. Often placid in most circumstances, these animals become genuinely frantic during storms; they may crash through plate glass windows or sliding doors, chew off doorknobs, break down their crates, try to dig through the floor, or simply careen blindly through the house (or, if they're outdoors, flee down the street), trying desperately to outrun their fear. They may break teeth and nails in their escape attempts; some lose bladder or bowel control.

If your dog is only mildly or moderately phobic, letting him see that *you* are not worried may well be enough to get him through a storm. Don't coddle him or comfort him—an “oh you poor thing, Mommy's scared too!” reaction will just reinforce his anxiety. And don't scold him, either—if he could help being frightened, he would. We more or less ignore Tucker as he follows us around, tell

him “it's fine” now and then in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, and make sure the door to at least one closet is open, should he want to go in and hide. He is more fearful if a storm strikes at night, which is not uncommon in phobic dogs; I encourage him to lie down between nightstand and bed, then dangle my arm down so my hand touches his side. This is usually enough to calm him down. Other owners have reported that it helps to turn all the lights on, then switch on the TV and turn on the washing machine and/or dryer to help mask the storm sounds (you can do this in the daytime, too, of course).

Some owners have had good success with Rescue Remedy or flower essences, herbal preparations with calming properties. Mimulus, Rock Rose, and Aspen are the essences most commonly used for thunderstorm fear. When a storm is rolling in, you can put about 5 drops in your dog's drinking water (a 1- to 2-cup bowl); if the storm has already arrived, you can administer several drops under his tongue. (You'll find these products at health food stores.)



Melatonin, typically used by humans to treat insomnia, has also worked very well for some dogs. A typical dose for an average-sized Golden is one 3-milligram tablet; you can give it if a storm is predicted or when one has arrived. You'll find many brands available; some are mixed with herbs or other substances that may not be safe for dogs, so read labels carefully—and always consult your veterinarian before use.

Another option is hug therapy or body wrapping, in which the dog wears a special,

snug body stocking (rather like a tight T-shirt) during stormy periods. The theory here is that any kind of trauma, including intense fear, can damage nerve endings, leading to out-of-proportion responses to certain stimuli. The snug-fitting wrap helps counteract this by providing a steady, unchanging stimulus which, it is thought, will eventually cause nerve endings to modify their reaction thresholds. Along these same lines, you might also consider Tellington touch (T-touch) therapy, a method of petting and stroking your dog in a systematic manner. For more information on this, contact Francine Morris, a T-touch expert here in Austin (512-338-4509; sekmet8@webtv.net).

Many sources recommend desensitization or counter-conditioning, techniques that can help teach your dog to respond in relaxed or cheerful ways to the sounds and other stimuli that scare her now. For example, you might start by exposing her to a very soft tape recording of thunder or a flashing light, and rewarding her with lots of treats and other positive reinforcement only if she stays calm. Over time, you slowly increase the volume and intensity, still offering treats for calm behavior; the idea is for the dog to associate good things with the “bad” sound or stimulus. *This process must be very, very gradual, and before you begin it, you should get professional guidance, either from a veterinarian or a behaviorist.*

For dogs with more severe thunderstorm phobia, pharmaceutical solutions can be very helpful. Many owners have good success with the sedative acepromazine (“ace”). Start with a small dose, just 1/4 to 1/2 tablet, so you can find out how your dog will respond; if you can administer it several hours before a storm comes in, he'll probably be able to relax more easily, and the medication will be more effective. *Important: Acepromazine lowers the seizure threshold, so if your Golden has ever had a seizure, never use this product without consulting your veterinarian.* Valium is another medication that works well for some dogs; ask your vet. And the latest preferred medication is clomipramine (Clomicalm), an anti-anxiety drug which is also helpful in treating separation anxiety.





When a thunderstorm approaches, Dee Dee's otherwise mellow disposition turns to severe anxiety.



Case history: Dee Dee. To find out what methods one GRR mom uses to deal with storm phobia, I recently chatted with Sandy Balch. Her Golden girl Dee Dee is a beautiful, sturdy, mellow-natured 7-year-old with a gorgeous champagne-blond coat and a head so unbelievably velvety that it's almost impossible to stop stroking her. And if you do stop, a gentle nudge or paw tap lets you know your work is not done yet! But Dee Dee is terrified of storms—so much so, in fact, that her original family feared for her own safety and surrendered her to GRR. Now, with the help of the vets at Century Animal Hospital, Sandy is working on calming Dee Dee's fears. I asked Sandy what Dee Dee does when a storm comes in. "She mostly runs around the house," says Sandy. "She will try to burrow into the couch or into the bed, tossing cushions and bedding around, and if she's crated, she really flips out and will batter her way out. Sometimes she loses control of her bladder." Dee Dee has learned how to rock the crate from side to side until it collapses; if she's not at a fever-pitch of anxiety, she also knows just how to lift the latch from the inside and simply let herself out. (Clever dog!) Her teeth are quite worn down, and the suspicion is that at least some of this is due to biting at crate bars in moments of stress.

It doesn't always take thunder to frighten Dee Dee; sometimes, unsettled conditions such as big clouds boiling swiftly across the sky can bring on a nervous attack.

Dee Dee takes one 50-milligram Clomicalm twice a day, every day; if the weather

threatens to be stormy, she gets an extra one. Sandy gives Dee Dee acepromazine only if she is having an especially hard time calming her. "With the Clomicalm, she doesn't get groggy, so I feel that I can try other techniques on her and she's actually able to respond to them," says Sandy. One suggestion offered by Dee Dee's vets was to crate her, switch on a recording of classical music, leave the room, and not release her from the crate until she is calm. The goal here is to help Dee Dee calm down when she is alone, since Sandy will not always be available when Dee Dee is frightened. Sandy says this approach can work if Dee Dee is not too anxious yet, but when she is really stressing, crating is the worst thing for her—it simply escalates her panic. If Sandy has to leave home when a storm is predicted, she simply gives Dee Dee her extra Clomicalm and leaves her loose. She may return to a somewhat disordered house, but figures that this is far preferable to confining Dee Dee.

Sandy also puts Rescue Remedy in Dee Dee's meals, mixing it with a little water in the bottom of the dish before pouring in the kibble. And she's planning to try hug therapy as well. So far she knows that Dee Dee is agreeable to wearing her tight T-shirt, but she hasn't had a chance to see if that will help when a storm comes in.

As Sandy's experience is proving, even bad thunderstorm phobia is generally manageable—if you have a lot of patience,

consult with your vet and/or a behaviorist, and are willing to keep on trying until you find the techniques that help. What's effective for one Golden may not work for another, but eventually you'll be able to come up with a personalized program to fit your dog.

Links for more information. Yankee Golden Retriever Rescue has an excellent article on storm phobia, covering the therapies mentioned here as well as others; see www.ygrr.org/doginfo/behavior-phobia.html. The HSUS site, www.petsforlife.org, has a number of useful articles; click on "Dog Behavior Tip Sheets" at the bottom of the home page. 

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