

# Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors

Promoting the Best in Pet Behaviour



## Fireworks - a pet's worst friend

**Studies have found that around half the UK dog population show some signs of fear of fireworks. This is a vital time of year for veterinary practices to proactively advise clients to help dogs cope with firework events. And don't forget about the other species on your client list - cats, rabbits, horses....they are all at risk especially those living outside.**

Written by Clare Wilson with very kind thanks to Kendal Shepherd and Rebecca Heyworth for supplying some photos and Trudi Atkinson for assistance with content.



### Fear or phobia?

**Fear** is a normal reaction to a threatening stimulus and is aimed to protect the individual from harm. Unfortunately this can develop into an excessive reaction that is far in excess of that expected by the level of threat. This excessive reaction is termed **phobia**. Rather than serving to protect the individual, this reaction can be detrimental to normal functioning and can interfere with essential processes such as feeding and sleeping. Animals that become sound phobic can start to generalise the sounds that they react to. They also can start to react to sounds of a lower intensity that they would previously have ignored. It is crucial to identify pets that are showing



### What can we do for scared dogs?

- Safe hiding places are really important. The dog above is looking relaxed, feeling safe under a table. Many dogs will already have a favourite spot and owners can try to make this more cosy with extra blankets, pheromone plug-in and some fabric items that smell of the owner's scent.
- The dog must have free access to this place at all times, not just be encouraged to use it when there is a phobic event.

mild signs of fear to fireworks in order to advise clients appropriately and avoid development of phobic responses and generalisation.



## What can we do for equines?

By Donna Skinsley, Full Member of the APBC

Fireworks are not limited to the 5<sup>th</sup> November and it's not uncommon for people to use fireworks to mark other celebrations through out the year, especially around New Year. This makes managing the situation with horses difficult due to their unpredictability. The best long-term solution in preventing a fear of fireworks is to teach a horse how to be confident and unconcerned about them and minimise their instinctive responses to such alarming situations.

This is best achieved through a mix of activities before and during the fireworks seasons:

### **Prior to the event.**

Set up scenarios under safe conditions in the horse's normal environment and implementing positive reinforcement training methods. A programme of systematic desensitisation and counter conditioning can be implemented utilising purpose made treatment CDs, such as '*Sounds Scary*', party poppers and such like in the run up to traditional firework seasons. This way every time the horse overcomes its fear, they are getting a boost to their confidence and literally getting braver and harder to scare. By influencing such experiences it ensures that a horse will learn to react to events in a manner that is acceptable to us and will

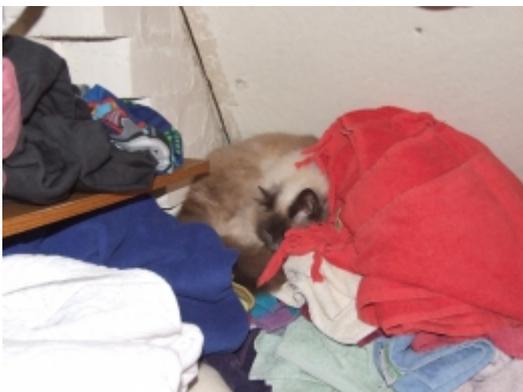
- Increase insulation from the sounds outside - close curtains, shut windows and doors.
- Background noise that is a familiar sound to the dog for example the usual television or radio channel or playing a CD can help to block out the firework sounds. However take care not to choose a channel that is showing a firework event!
- Many dogs find chewing reassuring so providing chew toys, hide chews or activity feeders can be beneficial.
- Owners must respond appropriately to their pets needs for interaction. Some dogs will choose to go away and hide alone and in this case owners may be best advised to allow the dog to cope in this way without their interference. Other dogs will be desperate for reassurance from their owners and in this case it is vital that the owners are there for their pet without accidentally making things worse. Making a big fuss of an anxious dog may well exacerbate the issue because the dog will perceive that the owner is also anxious. But if an owner ignores a dog who is stressed and demanding interaction as part of his coping strategy this could increase the dog's stress. Ideally the owner should calmly and confidently interact with the dog, perhaps just giving usual cue words such as 'in your bed' or slow gentle stroking to help calm and reassure. This will help the dog to see that the owner is not worried by the firework event
- Many dogs will relax better following a carbohydrate meal given 2-3 hours prior to the firework event.
- Remind owners that dogs should be given a toileting opportunity before any risk of fireworks being let off in the close vicinity.
- Anxiolytic medication depending on severity of clinical signs.

help them become confident, calm and natural problem solvers.

**On nights when fireworks are expected:**

- Keep the horse in a familiar environment if safe to do so but not in the proximity of known firework displays. Do not change their routine. If stabled a radio and yard lights may help to mask the noise and flashes of the fireworks. Horses at grass should have their fields made as safe and secure as possible. Check them early the next morning for any injuries or stray fireworks that may have landed over night.
- Provide Himalayan/Redmond rock salt licks, multiple forages (a mix of scattered hay and small netted haynets) and harvest suitable browse from unpolluted hedgerows to facilitate and prolong foraging during the night's events.

Owners should also be careful of riding during the firework season as often such unexpected sounds are not just limited to nightfall. Equally a horse that has been sensitised by the previous night's firework display may now become fearful and reactive to similar unexpected sights and sounds when ridden in subsequent days.



**What can we do for scared cats?**

Cats feel far safer if they are able to choose suitable hiding places. The cat above is hiding in the airing cupboard which is well insulated, dark and cosy.

Research has shown that hiding behaviour can significantly reduce cortisol



Many dogs will find chewing a relaxing activity so provision of activity feeders can be a good strategy for helping mildly fearful dogs cope with firework events.

More fearful dogs may be too stressed to eat and in such cases short term anxiolytic medication may be advisable.



**Case Study - Max 3 year old male Black Labrador**

Max's owners were referred from their vet because he no longer wanted to go for walks, was playing less with his canine housemate and was not eating well. Max had always shown concerns about firework noises but it was not until he moved house to a rural location that his situation deteriorated significantly. He lived in a house surrounded by shooting clubs in the distance and agricultural fields with bird scarers. When I visited Max he reluctantly entered the garden for a wee before rushing to the back door to enter the house and hide under the desk.

levels. Owners should be advised to allow their cats access to suitable hiding places at all times of year so that they already know where to go if they become frightened. Ensuring that cats have access to all the resources they need without having to be exposed to firework sounds is also important. For cats who would usually toilet outside it might be wise to provide an indoor litter tray as a temporary arrangement. Ideally cats that usually have free access to outdoors should be confined in the house in plenty of time when firework events are expected. Pheromone diffusers can also be very beneficial to cats.



## Longer term solutions - when to refer?

Many animals show only mild signs during the specific period of the firework season. The dog above was too fearful to go for a walk, further aggravated by the owner trying to force the dog out using a tightening slip lead, increasing fear even further. It is vital that progression of fear is prevented through appropriate advice for clients. Referral to an appropriately qualified and experienced behaviourist should be considered as soon as possible if the pet demonstrates any of the following:

- If the reaction to sounds is severe
- If the reaction to sounds is showing generalisation e.g. animal starting

If we listened very carefully, his owner and I could hear gun shots from the shooting club very quietly in the distance.

Max had become so phobic that even this very mild stimulation resulted in serious problems for his day to day life.

The male owner had forced Max to go out for walks by carrying him across the driveway and out to the local footpaths. If Max heard a bird scarer he hid in the hedge for half an hour shaking. He had also recently started to react to motorbikes he heard in the distance and this resulted in the same hiding behaviour. One of the first steps in treating Max was to help him to feel safer within the home. A proper den area was created for him under the desk which he had already chosen as his hiding spot, pheromone products were used, and plenty of fun activities inside the house particularly activity feeders. Max had previously been fed in the garden as the male owner was most emphatic that 'dogs eat outside'. Fortunately he was persuaded that Max would be relaxed enough to eat properly were he allowed to eat in the safety of the house. We also decided in the short term that attempting to take Max for walks was counter-productive as he was experiencing phobic episodes on a daily basis. Due to the severity of Max's reaction he was prescribed selegiline hydrochloride as an adjunct to behavioural modification and once he had shown improvements in his generalised anxiety state we began careful desensitisation and counter-conditioning using specially designed recordings of firework sounds. Max responded extremely well to treatment and started to enjoy life again and his canine housemate was especially thrilled to have her playmate back.

to react to sounds other than the initial stimulus

- If the reaction is affecting day to day life e.g. dog refusing to walk in specific locations or not wanting to go out after dark or a cat is remaining indoors or hiding frequently.

If you have clients with dogs, cats or horses showing these signs look for your local APBC member at [www.apbc.org.uk/help/regions](http://www.apbc.org.uk/help/regions)



Don't forget about rabbits and other small pets - they may need to be brought inside overnight.



### New Facebook page!

We have recently launched the following page on Facebook - **Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors - the veterinary team support page**. Please do 'like' us to receive updates about upcoming CPD events and other information to raise and maintain behavioural awareness amongst veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.



### Medication for events

**Benzodiazepines are the drug of choice** for canine and feline patients for their anxiolytic properties for short term management of sound phobia inducing events. Diazepam and alprazolam are both used under the cascade system but alprazolam has several advantages with a longer duration of action, less hepatotoxicity and less likelihood of paradoxical excitement. It is crucial to advise clients to do a test dose prior to firework events to determine the appropriate medication and dose rate for that individual. **Acepromazine is strictly contra-indicated** due to its strong sedative properties rendering the stressed animal unable to respond appropriately to the scary stimuli and increasing sound sensitivity.

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