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For Pet Parents and Pet Professionals

Animal Behavior Associates Newsletter

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Dog Piece:Thunderstorms, Fireworks and Fearful Dogs

This is the time of year when thunderstorms become more frequent, fireworks are being set off in neighborhoods and dogs are developing bad reactions to one or both. It is not uncommon for some dogs to become afraid of these events as well as gunshots and other loud noises. A



Dear Suzanne,

Well, how many of you caught our typos in last month's newsletter? Actually, it was a test Barb and Suzanne put together to see how closely you were reading! Seriously though, we were so embarrassed those got by three of us proof reading. We apologize, and thank you for tolerating our occasional "senior moments". We'll do our best not to let that happen again!
Best Wishes, Suzanne and Dan

- [Cat Piece:When Grooming Becomes a Problem](#)**

We often are contacted by people whose cats are licking themselves excessively. These problems go by a variety of names, including over-grooming, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or a type of stereotypy.



The behavior can have a number of causes ranging from medical to behavioral. Possible medical causes such as allergies or pain reactions should obviously be evaluated by a veterinarian. In this article

little fear or anxiety in response to loud noises is normal for animals as well as people. When these fearful responses are out of proportion to the real threat of the situation they are called phobias.

Dogs that are afraid of noises may shake, whine, pant, tremble, pace, drool, become destructive, house soil, attempt to escape, try to hide, bark or howl. The fears become a problem for their owners when the dogs' behavior causes damage, results in complaints, or puts the dog at risk of injury. Sometimes owners tell us that their dogs can "predict" thunderstorms. The dog begins to show the fearful reactions minutes or even hours before the storm hits. These dogs are not psychic; instead they're probably sensing the subtle changes in the atmosphere that precede the storms. Dogs are aware of darkening clouds, drops in barometric pressure and increasing moisture in the air that all reliably predict thunderstorms.

It's not always clear what causes these fears to develop. Particularly bad experiences with the sounds, such as a dog left outside during a bad thunderstorm can cause them, but we also think early experiences and genetic predispositions also play a role.

Noise phobias rarely get better on their own. In fact, many become progressively worse over time without intervention. Noise phobias sometimes generalize to other sounds. A dog that was initially afraid only of thunder may become fearful of fireworks, cars backfiring, nail guns or hammering. Noise phobias sometimes generalize to other things associated with the noise. A dog that is afraid of the sound of a vacuum cleaner may become afraid of the sight of the vacuum after a while.

Many times these fears can be managed or treated. One option is to try to remove the source of the sounds when you can, or remove the dog from the sounds.

Some animals may seek out a "safe" place to hide during the noise. It may be in a basement, in a closet or in the bathtub. If your dog seems less fearful in his "safe"

we'll focus on possible behavioral causes.

Licking, as part of grooming, is normal behavior for cats. It is a problem when it becomes excessive, resulting in injury or decreased welfare for the cat. Sometimes the licking can result in a shortened hair coat, hair loss, discoloration, or even damage to the skin that can result in infection.

A cat that spends so much time licking that other normal behaviors such as playing, interacting socially, eating, or sleeping decrease significantly, is not showing normal behavior patterns and needs help.

The most common behavioral reason for problem licking is some sort of stressor or conflict that the cat has been unable to avoid, escape from, or adapt to in other ways. We've seen the behavior develop as a result of social conflict among family cats, in cats that were anxious about a new dog in the house, or about a move, and by construction from a remodeling project. In other cases, we've never been able to identify an eliciting event.

Part of the reason for this is that stereotypies such as excessive licking can sometimes continue even after the initial stressor has disappeared. They become self-maintaining behaviors. Research into stereotypies in other species has shown that these repetitive behaviors can cause certain chemicals to be released into the bloodstream that have mood-elevating effects. So stereotypic behavior can allow an animal to cope with a stressful environment and become its own reward. Contrary to popular belief, these behaviors are usually not attention-seeking behaviors that owners have rewarded.

Why do some cats lick when under stress and others don't? Behaviorists don't know for sure, but one variable might be whether or not the cat can find other ways to cope with the stressor. Another possible difference is just the cat's basic "personality". Some cats are more resilient and aren't easily stressed. Other

place, continue to let him go there during the noises. If he doesn't have a safe place, consider giving him access to sheltered areas like the basement or closets and see if he goes there and seems less afraid. Letting your dog go to safe places won't resolve the fear, but may make it more manageable for you and him.

It usually takes a combination of behavior modification and medications prescribed by your veterinarian to reduce the dog's panic. Behavior modification often involves desensitization and counter conditioning - gradual, controlled exposures to the noise while keeping the dog in a relaxed or happy mood.

Exposing the dog to CDs or audio tapes of the sounds can help in this process. The best time to do this is when your dog is not going to be exposed to daily storms. We carry a selection of these sound recordings, including thunderstorms, fireworks and gunshots on our website.

www.animalbehaviorassociates.com This month we're featuring a sale of some of these recordings.

Never punish an animal that has a noise phobia or any other fear problem. Punishment will only make the fear worse.

Don't force your pet to experience the fear producing noises to "show" him that the sounds won't hurt him. Because fears aren't rational, your pet won't "get over it" or learn that the noises are harmless. Instead, these procedures will most likely make the problem worse.

June Fireworks and Storm Special

Desensitize Your Phobic Dog



Over an hour of high fidelity sounds of real thunderstorms. Includes sounds of thunder, wind and

cats may choose to fight back for example, if harassed by other animals, rather than passively turning the stress inward.

The first step in modifying the behavior (assuming it's not medically caused) is to try to identify the stressor or eliciting stimulus. Next, behavior modification - usually counter conditioning and desensitization - can be used to change the cat's reaction to the stressor.

Another option is to try to remove the eliciting stimulus from the cat's environment, or vice versa. Even providing more hiding places or finding other ways the cat can escape from or avoid the stressor can be helpful.

If the reason for the cat's licking can't be identified, trying to operantly condition an alternative behavior instead of licking may be possible, but often difficult. The reason this often doesn't work well is because of the emotional component to the problem. If the cat is anxious, this emotional state will make learning an operant task difficult, but perhaps not impossible. Anti-anxiety medication prescribed by a veterinarian may also be helpful on a short-term basis, not as a permanent solution.

• Our Piece: Summer Exercise with Your Pet

Summer time usually means warm days and pleasant evenings. Ideal conditions to get out and exercise with your pet dog, cat or horse.



Exercise can be just as beneficial for our pets as it is for us. It can help take off excess body weight and improve over-all physical condition. Both can lengthen the lifespan and improve the

rain. Useful for helping dogs get over their fears when used as a part of a systematic plan. Dogs' responses vary. We've used it and recommended it to clients for years. Cassette Tape. Normally \$12 **** This month only ** \$7.95** (FREE SHIPPING) discount will be taken in shopping cart

Also on sale this month
[Sound Sensibilities Audio CDs](#)

Regularly: \$25.95 Sale: \$20.95(FREE SHIPPING)

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quality of life.

Exercise can also help our pets by reducing boredom and increasing mental stimulation. The change of scenery from a pleasant ride with your horse or from playing a spirited game of fetch with your dog can be very stimulating. This stimulation may reduce some kinds of behavior problems, such as boredom digging in the back yard or excessive chewing of things that aren't to be chewed.

Another benefit to exercising with your pet is that the sharing of these activities can strengthen the bonds between you and your pet. Research on attachment in animals and people has shown that sharing of pleasurable activities can strengthen attachments for both animals and people.

After a cold winter, many of us are anxious to get outside and partake of our favorite sports, but most of us are out of shape and if we're not careful, injuries can result. The same is true of our pets.

We don't often think of our pets needing to get into condition for physical activities - we just assume they can go full speed whenever they want. Not true. Our pets need to start off easy and then gradually engage in more strenuous activities. This is particularly true if it has been a while since your pet has exercised vigorously.

It's especially important to take care with older animals or those that have physical disabilities. Check with your veterinarian before exercising your older animals or those with disabilities. Also, acclimate your pet to warm or hot conditions before exposing them to strenuous activities in the heat. Be sure your pet and you are well hydrated in hot conditions. Your veterinarian can give you sound advice about the limits to your pet's exercising and how you can best acclimate him to summertime activities.

Enjoy your time with your pet this summer and as they say at Royal

Caribbean Cruise Lines, "Get Out There!"

- **What's New: Coral's First Birthday and Suzanne on TV**

We celebrated Coral's one year birthday with a party at [The Den](#) that included a few doggie and human friends. The people had as much fun



watching the dogs as they did playing! Cake was provided by [Cosmos Bakery](#). Coral ran out of steam and fell asleep before her guests did, as she and mom had just driven in from a week in Gunnison that morning, where Suzanne had been hibernating, trying to get some writing done.



Suzanne had a rash of TV appearances this month - two on Channel 7 our local ABC affiliate to talk about preparing dogs for new babies and animal communicators, and two on Channel 2, our local WB affiliate to talk about dangerous dogs. With the reinstatement of Denver's pit bull ban and the fatal mauling of a little girl in Fruita CO, concern about aggressive dogs has increased. In response, we put together a CD containing over 35 articles we've written over the years about canine aggression. Our [Understanding Canine Aggression](#) CD is now available on our website. The articles address a range of topics, including protecting children from bites, why family dogs fight, myths about dominance, can aggression be predicted, and many more. You can reproduce the articles for educational purposes as long as proper credit is given.

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