

Firework fear

Time to make a difference



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OK, you've got through the crisis that was bonfire night, and now you have sufficient time to change your dog's mind about loud noises before next year.

Firstly, well done on your pro-activity! Good for you!

Secondly, it's really important that you create a long-term plan and stick to it if you are to see behavioural success next time those fireworks go off. This needs time and care, but it is worth it.

1. This first point may surprise you. In a recent study, a strong correlation was found between pain and a fear of sounds. (Mills et al, 2018)

Of course, if you think your dog is in pain you should see your vet immediately. However, some dogs are very good at hiding discomfort, and so you may have to look out for other clues that might indicate this is the case. For example, the fear of loud noises may have developed later in life (ie, your dog wasn't worried by them for the first few years of his or her life, but is now), your dog may avoid certain places or other dogs, and again this wasn't the case previously.

There is also some evidence to show that thyroid problems and age-related cognitive dysfunction can also affect dogs' ability to cope with loud noises, so whatever the symptoms, if you suspect that your dog is in pain, or has another veterinary problem, this needs to be addressed. Your dog's anxiety might actually be a symptom, rather than an issue in itself.

2. Assuming that your dog is fit and well, we now need to create a plan to help him gradually overcome his fear. This is based on systematic desensitisation and counter conditioning, and it needs time and care. It should last between 8-12 weeks, and many people find that they benefit from the help of a behaviour and training specialist, so ask your vet for a referral if you need to. They will be delighted that you are so proactive.



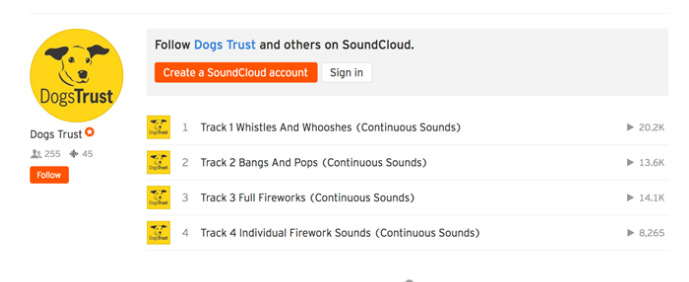
Here are the rules for the plan:

Getting ready

1. It's very important that at no stage your dog shows any anxiety during the rehab programme. It is designed to last approximately 8 weeks, but work slowly and progress at your dog's pace.

2. Without your dog in the room download and play (to yourself only) the free 'Sounds Scary' tracks from the Dogs Trust website. You will see that there are four options to choose from – you need to start with the sounds that are LEAST scary for your dog and work from there.

<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/dog-behaviour-health/sound-therapy-for-pets>



You will notice that there is a five second delay before the sounds start. This is so you can get yourself ready.

When listening to the sounds, you must decide on the volume that you will start with too. This needs to be so quiet that it's barely audible, and it certainly shouldn't be scary for your dog – he should be completely relaxed when you play the sounds... so start low, very low. (This is called sub-threshold.) Screen shot the level so that you can keep a track of where you started with the volume, and your progression.

3. Choose where you are going to train your dog.

It should be a comfortable, indoor room. Of course, if you have downloaded the sounds onto your smart phone, this can be anywhere you think is best, but pick somewhere your dog is relaxed.

4. Choose your dog's rewards.

These can be his favourite tasty treats, his favourite game with a toy, or his whole dinner. My favourite is to use treats, as these are easily delivered and you can count how many you are giving according to the number of seconds that the sounds play for, as well as making them exciting in the way that you deliver them.

5. When and how to give the food – timing and preferred delivery methods

Timing is all important with this training. Initially, we want our dogs to simply ignore the very quiet sounds, but as time goes on, we want him or her to actually like them – because he will associate them with food.

For this reason, I use the 'open bar / closed bar' technique. This means that when the sounds are on, the 'bar' (or food delivery system – ie, you!) is open. When the sounds stop, the bar is closed and there are no more goodies on offer.

So, as soon as you hit 'play' you need to start to give the food. The instant the sounds have stopped, you stop, and put the food away.



How you give the food matters too. These are my favourite delivery systems:

- **Scatter feeding** – you throw a handful of delicious food on the floor for your dog to eat (try to estimate that he will finish at the same time that the sounds do)
- **Catch the treat** – throw the treats one at a time for your dog to catch – most dogs need to learn how to do this, but once they get the hang of it they think it's a hilarious trick
- **Chase the treat** – you show the dog the treat, then toss it up the hallway or the length of your kitchen and let your dog scamper after it, and eat it. Then he comes back to you and you can throw the next one.
- **Find the treat** – ask your dog to wait or stay and then hide the treat in a very easy-to-find place. The instant he's eaten it, hide the next one. You can help your dog at the outset by being excited and showing him how to look, but as he starts to understand the game, make the hiding places more tricky.
- **Food in Kong** – you can put food in a Kong or Buster Cube, but try and gauge how much time it will take him to eat it because you really want the game to end as the sounds come to a close.

6. You are now ready.

Week 1

Click 'play' on the sounds you are using, which is already set at the lowest level. Remember, you should barely be able to hear them. As soon as you hear the first sound, engage your dog with the food or toys and deliver the goodies for the exact length of time (or as close as possible) as the sounds last. Then stop and put the goodies away.

Your dog should not even seem to notice that the sounds have been played. If he does, the noise level was too high and you need to drop them down lower.

Repeat at this level every day for a week (once for sure, twice if you are on a mission!). Tick off the boxes for each day so you remember which stage you are at as you progress.

Week 2

Assuming that your dog paid no attention to the sounds in week 1, in week 2, you are going to up the noise level by one tiny increment – the smallest increase you possibly can.

Repeat your fun and games at level 2 for this week, once again starting to feed and play as soon as you hear the sounds and stopping when they come to an end.

Week 3

One more step up in sound level. If at any time your dog shows a reaction to the sounds, immediately stop and reduce the level. You may need to spend more than a week at a certain level – that's absolutely fine – your dog doesn't know he's on a schedule!

Continue upping the sound level each week assuming that your dog pays no attention to it.

Week 4 – Week 8

By now, your dog should be starting to look hopefully at you as soon as the sounds start. This is a brilliant sign as it shows that he's making the connection between the noises and the goodies... well done you!

Continue working through the sound levels one week at a time, until you feel that your dog is confidently able to predict that food and fun is coming when he hears them... he should look and behave in a relaxed and eager way, not worried in the slightest, even when the sounds are clearly audible.


And finally

Once you have achieved such greatness in your preferred training area, move the location to a different room and repeat a few middle stages with your dog. Most typically at this stage, you can advance through the sound levels pretty fast, taking only a few days to reach the same levels as previously.

Keep a record of your dog's progress on the chart on the next page.

While the programme is intended to last 8 weeks, if you need to reduce the sound volume and stay at that level for another week, please do – for this reason there are 10 weeks shown on the chart.



	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
Week 1, Sound level 1							
Week 2 Sound level							
Week 3 Sound level							
Week 4 Sound level							
Week 5 Sound level							
Week 6 Sound level							
Week 7 Sound level							
Week 8 Sound level							
Week 9 Sound level							
Week 10 Sound level							

An important note:

Of course, life sometimes throws us a curve-ball. If, during your rehab programme, you suddenly hear fireworks for real, then immediately revert to the *'Help for right now'* guidance sheet.

Do NOT try to train your dog through the real firework noises. Just batten down the hatches, turn up the TV and get through it. Once the 'crisis' has passed, give your dog a couple of days break, and then go back to your structured training.