



If your cat is afraid of loud or sudden noises life can be miserable for both of you. Summer thunderstorms can become a major trauma and unless you live in a remote part of the country there is almost no way of avoiding the fireworks. These loud sounds can turn your pet into a nervous wreck. There are some simple tips to make the whole experience more bearable for you both, but to find a solution to the problem you will need to seek some expert help.

What are the signs of noise phobia?

Cats that are fearful of loud noises and unusual sounds can cause a range of behaviours that vary from one individual to another. It is likely that the cat will display a fearful posture with the body hair erect and the ears flattened back. Some cats will quickly flee to a safe spot that may be behind or under a piece of furniture.

It is possible for some cats to display aggression when their owners try to coax them from under the bed or retrieve them from their hiding spot. There are times when the aggression is directed towards another cat in the household.

What is a noise phobia?

Noise phobia simply means an unnatural fear of noise.

If your cat has been scared on one occasion, perhaps when caught outside during a thunderstorm, it can lose confidence in its immediate environment and become withdrawn and display behaviours akin to the human condition of agoraphobia (fear of open spaces).

Why does my cat have a noise phobia?

The reason why some cats are fearful of noises whilst others appear to be almost 'bomb proof' usually relates to their early environment. A cat that has been reared in a noisy and stimulating environment (such as the home), up until the age of 7 weeks, has been sufficiently exposed to a range of stimuli to make it less likely to develop fearful behaviours as an adult, particularly if they are homed into an equally challenging environment.

Cats that are reared in a quiet or secluded setting, such as a cattery, and not homed until the ages of 10 or 12 weeks of age are more likely to display fearful and nervous behaviours as an adult as they have not received sufficient exposure to a range of sounds.

There are, of course, genetic factors that can predispose a cat to display fearful behaviours but these cats would display a generalised fear of all stimuli, not necessarily just sounds.

How should I handle the problem?

If your cat displays a fearful response to sounds, you must be aware that your responses can inadvertently worsen the behaviour of your pet. If the cat is aggressive when it is frightened and you try to punish the cat to prevent the aggression occurring in the future, the cat may become increasingly aggressive on subsequent occasions. At the other extreme, if you try to comfort and reassure the cat, then it will gain nothing long-term as your actions may induce aggression from the cat as it tries to withdraw. As a general rule, it is better to allow the cat to withdraw to a small, dark place that appears safe and offer rewards in the form of food, interactions or play when the cat reappears so that they learn to overcome the fear more quickly in the future.

A cat that is feeling insecure within its home may respond more adversely to sounds so it is important that the cat's security is assured by providing raised platforms, little and often feeding as well as the use of an appeasing pheromone signal that can ensure the familiarity of the home environment. Time should be spent identifying the sound that elicits the fear response and finding ways to distract the cat or teaching it to respond differently.

What is desensitising therapy?

In some cases, the cat can be desensitised to the sound by exposing it to a level of the stimulus that does

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not cause a response. This can sometimes be achieved with the use of a tape-recording that is played at a low volume, but the owner may need to consider creating similar noises themselves. The low volume sound needs to be combined with a positive experience, such as feeding, for the treatment to have any benefit. With time, and as your cat gets used to the noises, the volume of the sound is increased.

In some cases, your veterinary surgeon may suggest trying some medication to aid progress by reducing the level of anxiety displayed by your cat.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact Dalehead Veterinary Group on (01729) 823538 and we will be happy to advise you.