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SEPARATION ANXIETY

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What Is Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety is one of the most common behavior problems reported by dog owners. Dogs experiencing this problem show distress at being separated from individuals they are attached to, usually family members and other pets. The distress can be expressed by barking and howling, attempts to escape, destructive behavior, house soiling, or signs of fear such as pacing, rapid breathing, whining, or drooling. It most often happens when a dog is left alone at home but can also happen when the dog is left in a vehicle, at a boarding kennel or other location where the individuals familiar to the dog are not present.

What Causes Separation Anxiety?

Why some dogs develop separation anxiety and others don't isn't known. Dogs are highly social animals and usually form attachments quite easily to other animals and people. Whether dogs with separation anxiety are "overly attached" to their owners, or whether the problem is due more to a lack of coping skills when left alone really isn't known. Many dogs are quite attached to their owners but don't show signs of separation anxiety. The problem is more common in dogs acquired from shelters or who have had multiple homes. There may be something about the breaking of attachments when a dog leaves a home that predisposes him to the problem.

Common initiating events for separation anxiety include a move to a new home, a change in the owner's schedule, family members moving away, the death of another family pet to whom the dog was attached, or returning home after being boarded.

What Are The Symptoms?

The symptoms of separation anxiety described above typically begin within thirty minutes of the owner's departure. Sometimes the dog will begin to show symptoms when the person is preparing to leave. Some dogs can identify activities that predict leaving, such as picking up car keys or putting on a coat, and they begin to get anxious in anticipation of the departure. These dogs may pace, whine, drool, pester for attention, appear anxious or look depressed and hide.

Not all dogs show the same symptoms. Some only bark and howl, some only urinate and defecate and some only show destructive behavior. Some may show more than one symptom. Dogs that try to escape from a yard, often just sit on the front porch when they do get out. Sometimes dogs can show symptoms when the family members are home, but the dog can't get to them because she is separated by a closed door or is in a crate.

Dogs with separation anxiety often show over-exuberant greeting responses when their owners return. Most dogs greet people with enthusiasm, but the anxious dogs go overboard. Their excitement may last several

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minutes. These dogs also tend to “shadow” their owners, following them constantly, not letting them out of sight and leaning against or touching them very frequently.

All the behavioral manifestations of separation anxiety can be due to other causes, including noise phobias, “boredom” when left alone, incomplete housetraining, excitement or scent marking. It is important to correctly identify the causes of the particular behaviors before trying to manage or modify them. Not all “home alone” problems are due to separation anxiety. The wrong management or behavior modification techniques will either not be effective or make the problem worse.

Can Separation Anxiety Problems Be Resolved?

Behavior modification for separation anxiety problems is usually quite successful. Success often improves with the addition of medication prescribed by a veterinarian. Sometimes the behavior modification by itself can successfully treat the problem. Medication alone has not been demonstrated to be a successful treatment long-term, although dogs can be sufficiently sedated that they do not display the symptoms.

The behavior modification program is designed to reduce the dog’s anxiety at being left alone and often utilizes procedures called systematic desensitization and counter conditioning. To better understand these techniques, read the Pamphlet for Pet Parents about them.

The idea is to gradually expose the dog to progressively longer separations from people, starting with ones so short that the dog doesn’t show any anxiety at all and then make them longer and longer. It is important that the dog show no anxiety during the process because an anxiety attack will cause setbacks to the treatment.

Multiple repetitions of departure cues, without leaving, is sometimes part of the behavior modification plan. The dog must be monitored carefully during these repetitions, and during the separations, (sometimes videotaping is required) for signs of anxiety, and the procedure must be done slowly in small steps. It is also helpful to put the dog in an emotional state that is “counter” to or incompatible with anxiety during the training. Giving the dog a tempting food-filled toy that is available only during the planned absences can help block anxiety.

Behavior modification plans must be implemented very carefully if they are to be successful. The most common cause of failure is incorrect implementation of the techniques, by not using small enough increments or subjecting the dog to longer absences before he is sufficiently conditioned to tolerate shorter ones. When the procedures are done incorrectly, they can actually make the problem worse. Most people will need the help of an experienced certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant to help resolve the problem. Talk to your pet professional about help or a referral. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

Can Separation Anxiety Be Prevented?

Because the causes of separation anxiety are so poorly understood, it is difficult to make many specific recommendations that can be expected to reliably prevent the problem. When you first acquire your dog, whether as

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a puppy or adult, accustom her to brief, variable and unpredictable separations from you. Try to make all your departures quiet and relaxed. When you return, make your greeting quiet and relaxed as well. Avoid exciting your dog when you come and go. Try to associate separations from you with pleasant things such as leaving your dog with a chew toy stuffed with tasty treats.

What Not To Do

Dogs don't destroy things, house soil, escape or bark and howl out of spite or for revenge. It does no good to get mad at your dog. If the problem is caused by separation anxiety, the dog is frightened and panicked at being separated from you and that is what is causing the problem behavior. She isn't misbehaving to purposely "get back" at you.

Never, ever punish a dog with separation anxiety or any other fear related problem. Punishing a fearful animal is cruel and will not solve the problem. Don't crate or confine a dog with a separation anxiety problem. Close confinement often makes the panic worse and can lead the dog to hurt herself trying to escape. Separation anxiety is not caused by a lack of "dominance" over the dog, or from a lack of obedience training. So called "dominance exercises or teaching your dog basic commands such as sit, down, come and stay will not resolve a separation anxiety problem.

Drs. Suzanne Hetts and Dan Estep are Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists and international award-winning speakers and authors living in Denver, Colorado. For over 25 years they have been helping pet parents understand their pet's behavior and solve behavior problems.