

Separation Anxiety

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Dogs are social animals, and form strong attachments to other dogs and to people. The dog's first experience with separation anxiety is when the pup is separated from its mother and littermates. New owners expect their puppy to be restless the first few nights that he spends in this new home. In later life, problems arise when a genetically dependant dog has a strong attachment to one person. The owners are kindly people who spend a lot of time with their dog; they allow it to follow them around the house, and appreciate the excited welcome the dog gives them when they return home. Unwanted behaviour often starts when the owner's schedule changes so that the dog is left alone more frequently, or at different times than when he is used to.

Signs of separation anxiety are only seen in the owner's absence, or when the dog is prevented from being close to the owner (for example, at night). The dog is in a high state of anxiety or conflict because he wants to be with the owner and is prevented from doing so. Dogs, like people, cannot stay in a high state of anxiety for long, and must do something to reduce the tension. While you or I might have a relaxing bath, or go for a run, the dog can only do "doggie" things to reduce the tension. Things dogs do to reduce tension include:

- chewing, digging or licking which cause destruction in the home.
- hyperactivity (pacing and drooling).
- reduced activity levels, depression, loss of appetite.
- urination or defecation.
- diarrhea or vomiting.
- barking.
- self-destructive redirected behaviours (ie. Lick granulomas).
- resists confinement.

It is important to realize that the dog is not doing these things to get even with you for leaving him, out of boredom, or due to a lack of obedience. Consider instead that his dependence on you is so great that he becomes anxious when you leave. He must relieve this tension, and his methods of doing so may cause considerable damage. Also consider that, no matter how flattering his constant attention to you may seem, it is not fair to the dog to allow him to be so stressed by your absence that he must respond with one of these unwanted behaviours.

TREATMENT OF SEPARATION ANXIETY -- WHAT DOESN'T WORK

Many people wonder about getting a pet for their pet, so that the dog won't be lonely while they are out. This does not work, because the excessively tight bonding is between you and your dog. Having the company of another has no effect on the distress that your dog feels when you leave.

Punishment does not work. Dogs do not make the association between making a mess and being punished for it at a later time. They also cannot reason that if they don't make a mess in the future, they won't be punished. Even though your dog may look "guilty" when you come home to a mess, he has learned that when you are present and a mess exists, he is in trouble. If someone who had never scolded your dog went into your house and a mess was present, the dog would not look guilty.

Tying the dog to chewed objects, or painting them with hot sauce may stop him from chewing them. However,

the tension he feels will be directed elsewhere.

TREATMENT OF SEPARATION ANXIETY -- WHAT DOES WORK

Have someone, other than the person to whom the dog is attached, take the dog for a fast walk on a leash, at least once a day. It should be 15-30 minutes long. Even if your dog has a large yard to run in all day, the fast walking will be beneficial.

Owner should obedience train the dog for 10 minutes twice daily. Train control and quiescence by teaching come, sit, stay, and down-stay. The goal is to achieve a 20 minute down-stay. Train with food rewards. Give the dog a reward every time he performs when you are first teaching a command, but as he gets better at it, reward the behaviour intermittently. This makes the response less easily forgotten. It is valuable to perform these training sessions at the same time each day.

Give the dog an acceptable item to chew, only when you go out. We find that a hard nylon bone is very useful. Drill a number of small holes in it, and stuff the holes with cheese. The cheese helps to attract the dog to the bone which becomes a distracter. Give the bone to the dog without inducing excitement about 15 minutes before you go out, and well before you give the dog any cues that you are about to leave.

Everyone in the family must totally ignore the dog especially 15-20 minutes before leaving the house (after you give the dog his bone) and for at least 20 minutes on returning home. This helps to reduce the dog's excitement level before you leave, which reduces the tension he feels when you are gone.

In addition to the above training, the person most attached to should totally ignore the dog for a minimum of three weeks. This is the most important part of the treatment, because it reduces the dog's dependence on you. Ignoring means not allowing the dog to follow you around, and not looking at, talking to, or touching the dog. Just pretend that the dog does not exist! We know how difficult this is (you get a dog to enjoy it's company) but it is absolutely essential that you do it. Keep in mind that it is for a short time relative to the dog's life, and that if you do this conscientiously, it will work quickly and effectively to solve your problem. Be assured that you will be able to relate to your dog in a more normal way, once the dog's dependence on you has been reduced. Drugs may be necessary in order to stop destruction or noise, and to assist the dog in accepting being ignored.

Drugs may be used in association with the training, but they do not cure the problem.

Make a list of things that you do before you go out for the day (and the destruction occurs), and the things you do before you go out for a short time (and no destruction occurs). Then, mix up the cues. For example, if the dog is fine when you go downstairs to do the laundry, try taking the laundry basket with you when you go to work.

It is important not to confine the dog because the more the confinement, the greater the anxiety.

If the above methods do not work, we can try Planned Departure training in conjunction with this program. However, this is quite time consuming, and requires even more commitment from you than the above.

The above techniques have worked well in the past, but they require a commitment from you if they are to be effective. Although we cannot retrain your dog, we are here to help you in whatever way we can, so please call if you have any problems or questions.