



Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is a condition suffered by some dogs who simply cannot be left alone without doing damage to their surroundings, to themselves, or both. In most cases, the bond between the dog and owner has “over-developed” to the point where the dog panics ‘when left alone.

Separation anxiety can be serious and can affect any dog in any situation. While some people think it’s “cute” that their dogs “love” them so much they can’t stand to be apart, separation anxiety can be very hard on the dog and the family with whom he lives.

The good news is that, in many situations, separation anxiety can be significantly lessened by utilizing behavior modification techniques. And, while it does take time and commitment on the part of the pet owner, many dogs that suffer from separation anxiety can overcome their fears and become terrific family pets.

Identifying Separation Anxiety

One of the major pitfalls when working with separation anxiety is the initial diagnosis. Many of the symptoms mirror other behavioral problems. As a result, the wrong techniques may be used in an attempt to cure the “problem” - which can increase the anxiety and make the problem worse.

The first step is to identify the symptoms of separation anxiety. They may appear in different degrees of severity and all may not occur in every pet. If you are having trouble leaving your pet alone, a qualified Behavior Consultant can help you develop an effective treatment plan.

Symptoms of Separation Anxiety

Some symptoms of separation anxiety include:

- Urination or defecation only when you’re away from home.
- Destruction inside the house, typically focused on exit routes such as doorways and windows.
- Howling that begins shortly after you leave (more of a howl than a bark).
- Self-mutilation; chewing on legs, flanks, etc. only when you’re gone.
- Signs of stress; salivating, trembling, etc. every time you prepare to leave the house.
- Signs of stress when crated, including self-mutilation, excessive salivation, destruction of the crate and urination or defecation inside the crate.

These are only some of the more common symptoms of separation anxiety and can appear in any degree and in any combination. It is also true that most of these symptoms can be signs of other behavior issues and may not necessarily indicate separation anxiety.

What to do

If you suspect your dog is suffering from separation anxiety, it is necessary that you contact a qualified Behavior Consultant to help you devise a treatment plan.

In the meantime, the following tips may help ease your dog's stress:

- Keep your departures and arrivals low-key; ignore your dog and quietly leave, come home and let him out without speaking to him or petting him initially.
- Try diverting your dog's attention with a Kong® or a sterilized, hollow beef bone stuffed with treats, peanut butter or cheese spread just before you leave.

What to Avoid

The following should be avoided:

- Confining your dog to an indoor kennel or crate and leaving him alone could result in self-mutilation.
- Feeding your dog right before you leave could result in gastric upset, causing urination, defecation or vomiting.
- ***Punishing your dog for being destructive should be avoided at all costs***; this can greatly increase his stress level and therefore increase his anxiety about your leaving and returning.
- Bringing another dog into the home when your dog is stressed when separated *from you*, would likely teach a new dog to become stressed as well.

For more information about pet behavior and training, please **visit our website at michiganhumane.org**.