

Separation Anxiety

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It is estimated that in the average veterinary practice 14% of the canine patients show signs of separation anxiety. These signs may be non-specific and it is required that an accurate diagnosis is made prior to treatment. Affected dogs will commonly destroy objects in the house or parts of the house, eliminate, vocalize, or salivate when left alone. The onset of these symptoms may vary relative to the duration since the owner left. Problems may occur when the owner prepares to leave, shortly after departure, or several minutes or hours after departure. No matter how severe the symptoms are and independent of the onset of the problem, the condition will not improve without systematic treatment since the dog's fear will increase with every negative experience he/she makes when left alone.

The onset of problems may be associated to lacking training and habituation as an adolescent dog, a sudden change in the owner's schedule or family structure, or as part of age related behavior changes. Many dogs will show signs of separation anxiety that may not pose a problem to the owner yet. These symptoms include following the owner, restlessness before departure, after returning, depressed behavior prior to leaving the house. A traumatic event (burglars, an alarm, a thunder storm) or gradual increases in anxiety may give the owner the impression that the onset was spontaneous. Dog suffering from separation anxiety tend to react more quickly or intensely to stimuli than others. The state of 'hyper-reactivity' (hyper-vigilance, motor activity, systemic effects like inappropriate elimination), as reported by the owners or observed during the consultation, may represent a neurochemical variation that correlates with the development of anxiety. Many dogs presented for separation anxiety will suffer from other fear related problems, such as noise phobias or fear- aggression.

Risk factors

- Change of ownership
- Shelter dogs (relinquishment may cause or catalyze the problem)
- Periods of kenneling
- Lacking habituation to isolation after adoption of a puppy
- Confinement without prior training
- Generalized anxiety and other fear related behavior problems
- Previous episodes of separation anxiety

Making a diagnosis

Dogs suffering from separation anxiety show unspecific signs, like inactivity and withdrawal, salivation, tremor, vocalization, pacing, and aggression. Although these signs may not pose a problem for the owner as long as the dog is not barking, chewing, urinating or defecating in the house, the dog will benefit from treatment to prevent additional problems and to relieve the dog's anxiety.

a) Different stages or manifestations of separation anxiety include:

- the dog will stay with anyone (owners, strangers, pet sitter, etc.)
- the dog will only stay with a family member
- the dog will only stay with one specific family member
- the dog will stay alone if it has the run of the house
- the dog will stay alone if confined to a comfortable area
- the dog will not show signs of separation anxiety if left in the car
- the dog will show signs of anxiety if the owners confine him/her to a room while they are at home

b) Symptoms that occur *exclusively* during the real or perceived absence of the owner (obtaining a video or audio recording of the dog when it is left alone is an important tool to diagnose the condition and exclude differential diagnosis):

- destruction
- defecation and / or urination
- vocalization
- excessive self-grooming
- excessive salivation
- anorexia
- pacing

c) Differential diagnosis

| Symptom | Rule out |
|--------------|--|
| Destruction | Play behavior Lacking training (puppy behavior) Outside stimuli (rodents, visitors, other fear-inducing stimuli, etc.) |
| Urination | Upper or lower urinary tract disease Endocrinopathy (e.g. cushing's, diabetes) Incomplete houstraining Marking Insufficient access to the outdoors Drug treatment (e.g. corticosteroids) Submissive urination or over excitement |
| Defecation | Diet change Parasitemia Marking Incomplete houstraining Insufficient access to the outdoors Diarrhea |
| Vocalization | Illness, distress, pain Social stimulus (e.g. traffic, dogs, visitors) |
| Salivation | Dental disease Nausea |
| Anorexia | Medical condition Dental disease |
| Lethargy | Medical condition Age-related changes |

Treatment options

The basic treatment of separation anxiety involves behavior modification. Combination with medication may be considered in severe cases. Treatment may take weeks or months. Owners have to understand that there are no 'quick fixes' since the condition developed some time ago and may have existed fairly long. If destructiveness, elimination problems, or barking can't be tolerated, interim solutions (dog walker, a neighbor or friend, day care) should be considered seriously.

Punishment (bark collars, scolding upon return, etc.), acquiring a second dog (unless the problem began when a canine or feline companion passed away), and confinement will not work. They may increase the dog's anxiety and worsen the problem!

a) Crate training

Depending on the dog's previous experiences, training, and individual differences, a dog may feel safe in an enclosed space, like a crate. If a dog shows signs of distress in confinement, the use of a crate – independent of its kind and size – is contraindicated since it will most likely increase the dog's anxiety. In addition, the dog's attempts to escape may result in severe injuries.

b) Inadvertent reinforcement

Dog owners tend to reward anxious behavior with their attention. Instead, calm behavior should be rewarded and trained systematically (see handout). Behaviors that signal anxiety have to be ignored to avoid inadvertent reinforcement of an unwanted behavior. Owners of dogs with separation anxiety feel not only angry and frustrated. They feel guilty for leaving the dog alone at home and try to make up while they are at home.

c) Independence training

Separation anxiety is largely caused by the extremely strong social bond between a dog and the owner or the dog's inability to be isolated. The need for social contact is normal in any social species, however, the responses seen in dogs with separation anxiety are extreme and non-adaptive. The owner has to achieve a healthy emotional distance with their dog to create a basis for successful training. This involves that the owners may not react to the dog's attention seeking behavior. Interactions have to be strictly limited. All activities involving the dog are initiated by the owner.

In addition, the dog has to learn to stay in an area apart from the owner. This can be achieved with the help of systematic 'sit' and 'stay' training. Owners have to progress extremely slowly. The dog has to learn to stay and relax while the owner will walk away for increasing distances and duration.

To adapt the dog to short departures, owners are asked to create 'departures' or periods of isolation while they are at home. This includes closing doors to rooms, commanding the dog into a 'sit-stay'. Owners should not allow dogs with separation anxiety to sleep on the furniture when the owner is sitting there, in physical contact with the owner, or on the bed.

c) Habituation to departure stimuli

Dogs with separation anxiety tend to show the first signs of anxiety long before the owner leaves. The owner should attempt to habituate the dog to stimuli that have been associated with the departure previously. The dog learned (classic conditioning) that _____ (e.g. putting on make-up, taking the keys, putting a coat on) is followed directly by leaving.

The owners are encouraged to make a list of all activities (morning routine) and stimuli (keys, shoes, coat, computer case, etc) which may signal the dog that they are leaving (How can your dog tell the difference between a Sunday and a weekday?). These stimuli will now be presented independent of departures on a randomized schedule (taking key, putting them down, take keys, put them in your pocket; take your coat and sit down to read, take the coat to the car prior to leaving the house).

d) Planned departures

Since most dogs react to any departure – independent of the owners actual absence - the dogs have to habituate to frequent coming and going. Instead of splitting the day into 4 phases (night time, time of anticipation of isolation, isolation, and return), the owner will make it a habit to come and leave over and over again in the evenings and during the weekends. The dog will be totally ignored before departure and upon return. Soon they will adapt to the fact that people come and go frequently for short periods of time. This principle is often applied inadvertently: dogs tend to stay alone in the car without a problem since they learned that the owner will leave only shortly (gas station – 5 minutes, drop off at child care – 5 minutes, dry cleaner – 3 minutes, grocery shopping – 40 minutes). The more often and systematic this can be done, the faster the success of the program will be seen (see handout).

SEPARATION ANXIETY

Dogs with separation anxiety exhibit behavior problems when they're left alone (confinement in a room, departure of the owner, leaving the dog at home, or leaving the dog in the car). Typically, they'll have a response within a short time after their owners leave them. The most common of these behaviors are:

- Digging, chewing and scratching at doors or windows
- Howling, barking and crying.
- Urination and defecation.

It's important to realize that the destruction and house soiling that often occurs with separation anxiety is not the dog's attempt to punish or seek revenge on his owner for leaving him alone, but is actually a panic response. Any form of punishment will worsen the situation.

In cases in which minor symptoms have been present for a period of time, separation anxiety may become a serious problem when:

- A dog has never or rarely been left alone previously.
- Following a long interval, such as a vacation, during which the owner and dog are constantly together.
- After a traumatic event (from the dog's point of view) such as a period of time spent at a shelter or boarding kennel.
- After a change in the family's routine or structure (a child leaving for college, a change in work schedule, a move to a new home, a new pet or person in the home).

Symptoms

:

If most, or all, of the following statements are true about your dog, he/she may have a separation anxiety problem. In this case, please follow the treatment recommendations listed below and seek qualified advice to exclude other causes for the behavior and a specific treatment plan to resolve the problem!

- She/he
 - barks,
 - destroys items,
 - salivates,
 - eliminates,
 - and / or vocalizes when left alone
- He/she reacts with excitement, depression or anxiety to your preparations to leave the house.
- He/she displays effusive, frantic greeting behaviors.
- The behavior **only** occurs when he's left alone, whether for a short or long period of time.
- He/she dislikes spending time away from family members.
- He/she follows you from room to room whenever you're home.

Treatment options:

- Keep arrivals and departures low-key. For example, when you arrive home, ignore your dog for the first 20 minutes. Leave the house without paying any attention to the dog. Act as if “you would only get the paper”.
- Establish a "safety cue"--a word or action that you use *every* time you leave that tells your dog you'll be back. Dogs usually learn to associate certain cues with short absences by their owners. For example, when you take out the garbage, your dog knows you come right back and doesn't become anxious. Therefore, it's helpful to associate a safety cue with your practice departures and short-duration absences. Avoid cues on your way to work! Make sure that the cue signals to the dog: they are only out for a few seconds or minutes.
- Some examples of safety cues are: a playing radio; a playing television; a bone; or a toy (one that doesn't have dangerous fillings and can't be torn into pieces). Use your safety cue during practice sessions, but don't present your dog with the safety cue when you leave for a period of time longer than he can tolerate or the value of the safety cue will be lost. Leaving a radio on to provide company for your dog isn't particularly useful by itself, but a playing radio may work if you've used it consistently as a safety cue in your practice sessions. If your dog engages in destructive chewing as part of his separation distress, offering him a chewing item as a safety cue is a good idea. Very hard rubber toys that can be stuffed with treats and Nylabone-like products are good choices.

The primary treatment for more severe cases of separation anxiety is a systematic process of getting your dog used to being alone. You must teach your dog to remain calm during "practice" departures and short absences.

Planned departures:

- Begin by engaging in your normal departure activities (getting your keys, putting on your coat), then sit back down. Repeat this step over and over in the evenings and during the days off work until your dog shows no distress in response to your activities.
- Next, engage in your normal departure activities *and* go to the door and open it, then sit back down.
- Next, step outside the door, leaving the door open, then return.
- Finally, step outside, close the door, then immediately return. Slowly get your dog accustomed to being alone with the door closed between you for several seconds. Use different doors.
- Proceed very gradually from step to step, repeating each step until your dog shows no signs of distress (the number of repetitions will vary depending on the severity of the problem).
- Make sure to vary the previous steps (get the coat and stay inside; get the coat and go out and return; ...)
- If at any time in this process your actions produce an anxiety response in your dog, you've proceeded too fast. Return to an earlier step in the process and practice this step until the dog shows no distress response, then proceed to the next step.
- When your dog is tolerating your being on the other side of the door for several seconds, begin short-duration absences. Your return must be low-key: ignore your dog's greeting behavior. If you signal distress (=excessive greeting), the dog will react accordingly and anxiety increases.
- If he/she shows no signs of distress, repeat the exercise. If he appears anxious, wait until he relaxes to repeat the exercise.
- Gradually increase the length of time you're gone. Again, use an intermittent training schedule and leave for 1 minute, 3 minutes, 1 minute, 5 minutes, 2 minutes, 8 minutes, 6 minutes, 1 minute, 30 seconds, go to the door and sit down, 5 minutes, etc..
- Practice as many absences as possible that last less than ten minutes. You can do many departures within one session if your dog relaxes sufficiently between departures. You should also scatter practice departures and short-duration absences throughout the day.
- Once your dog can handle short absences (30 to 90 minutes), he'll usually be able to handle longer intervals alone and you won't have to work up to all-day absences minute by minute.
- The hard part is at the beginning, but the job gets easier as you go along. Nevertheless, you must go slowly at first.

- In addition: do not allow the dog to follow you all day. Close door behind you. Enjoy privacy. Start with short periods of time (e.g. closing the bathroom door) and increase their duration over time (spend some time alone in the bedroom, make the dog sleep outside the bedroom using a baby gate, later start closing the door all night).
- Do not allow the dog to solicit your attention. Withdrawing attention and limiting interactions to a point in time and duration that you determine will allow the dog to be more independent.
- It is harder for the dog to stay alone at home while you are at work if he/she has your undivided attention in the evenings and during the weekends. Whenever you are at home, repeat the exercises listed above and habituate the dog to being alone / the stimuli that signal the dog that you intend to leave.
- Vary your normal routine in the morning. You can include training session into the morning routine and habituate the dog to stimuli that will normally signal your departure (opening the garage door, a specific bag you pack, putting the shoes on, etc.). Put your shoes on earlier one day, put them on outside the other day. Open the garage door 30 minutes before you leave. Move the car down the block. Open and close the garage door a few times while you are home without leaving the house,

Teaching The Sit-Stay And Down-Stay

Practice sit-stay or down-stay exercises using positive reinforcement. Never punish your dog during these training sessions. Gradually increase the distance you move away from your dog. Your goal is to be able to move briefly out of your dog's sight while he remains in the "stay" position. The point is to teach him that he can remain calmly and happily in one place while you go to another. As you progress, you can do this during the course of your normal daily activities. For example, if you're watching television with your dog by your side and you get up for a snack, tell him to stay, and leave the room. When you come back, give him a treat or quietly praise him.

Additional options and interim solutions

Because the above-described treatments can take a while, and because a dog with separation anxiety can do serious damage to himself and/or your home in the interim, some of the following suggestions may be helpful in dealing with the problems in the short term:

- Consult your veterinarian about the possibility of drug therapy. An anti-anxiety drug may help to reduce the dog's anxiety while you're gone. Such medication is a temporary measure and should be used only in conjunction with behavior modification techniques. Be aware that drugs will not replace any treatment. They may only support your efforts. Many drugs will show the first effects after 4-6 weeks into treatment.
- Take your dog to a dog day care facility.
- Leave your dog with a friend or neighbor.
- Take your dog to work with you, even for half a day, if possible.

Don't!

- Do not leave your dog in the car. Hot and cold weather may pose severe risks for the dog. Confinement in the car may cause the dog to panic in a situation that was tolerated previously.
- Punishment is not an effective way to treat separation anxiety. In fact, if you punish your dog after you return home it may actually increase anxiety.
- Getting another pet. This usually doesn't help an anxious dog as his anxiety is the result of his separation from you, his person, not merely the result of being alone.
- Confinement or crating your dog. Your dog will still engage in anxiety responses in the crate. He may urinate, defecate, howl or even injure himself in an attempt to escape from the crate.
- Leave the radio on (unless the radio is used as a "safety cue" - see above).
- Obedience school. While obedience training is always a good idea, it won't directly help a separation anxiety problem. Separation anxiety is not the result of disobedience or lack of training, it's a panic response