



ADVICE SHEET 6

Home Alone! Separation Anxiety Disorder in Dogs

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There are many terms that are used to describe a dog's behaviour when left alone in the house – separation related behaviour; isolation distress, separation distress and so on. The most common term used is “separation anxiety” and this is used to describe a behavioural disorder where a dog becomes anxious and distressed when left alone at home and exhibits behaviour that indicates this distress. It is one of the most common forms of behavioural disorder found in dogs but also one of the least treated.

This behaviour can take many forms. There are the obvious ones such as barking constantly, howling, whining, toileting and destruction of exit points and furniture. But some distress signs can be silent – pacing, salivating, wet paw marks, standing or sitting frozen at exit points or windows. Often times people have a hard time identifying what true separation anxiety disorder in dogs looks like and how one goes about treating it.

Is it my Fault my Dog Has Separation Anxiety?

The answer to this question is almost always a resounding “No”. There are many reasons your dog may suffer from separation anxiety – your dog may have had this condition for a while or it may suddenly appear. We do not really know exactly why some dogs suffer from this disorder whereas other dogs don't but various studies have indicated that the following may be some of the factors influencing this condition -

- change in owner's work schedule
- suddenly going back to work after being at home for a long time
- moving home
- a change in the household – kids leaving home, a divorce or the death of a family member
- multiple rehoming

- long periods of kennelling
- the dog has been ill for a long time and kept at home with the owner
- never being trained to be alone
- coming from rescue
- a traumatic event in the dog's life.
- even a genetic factor which makes the dog more prone to developing the condition

How to Treat Separation Anxiety

It is incredibly rare that a dog simply will “get over” the panic they feel when you leave them alone. The best way to help your dog is by getting help from a qualified behaviourist, preferably someone who understands and specialises in this disorder.

If you're not ready for professional help make sure to avoid some common mistakes that people make when trying to help their dog.

- Try not to leave the dog alone – every time the dog is left alone he becomes more frightened of being alone and his fear escalates – use services such as day care, friends, neighbours, sitters, take the dog to work etc.
- Crates rarely help a dog who is experiencing separation anxiety. The dog might happily sleep in his crate overnight or spend time in the crate when the owner is at home but being confined in a crate when alone can add to the stress by making the dog feel trapped and this can lead to self-injury when the dog tries to escape.
- Getting a second dog is not the answer! The dog's distress when alone is panic caused by not being able to cope without its ‘human’. Another dog will not relieve this panic and it is possible that the other dog will develop this disorder as well.
- Shock and spray collars are not the way to treat the issue. Causing a dog pain to suppress a behaviour is not the answer. All that is happening is the dog now feels

pain so is afraid to vocalise but the panic does not disappear and in all likelihood it gets worse.

- Not letting your dog sleep on your bed or on the furniture will make no difference. Plenty of dogs are allowed to do this and do not suffer from separation anxiety
- Giving your dog lots of exercise, mental stimulation and training is great but it won't help them be happy to be alone
- Withdrawing attention also does not work and actually adds to the anxiety.

Can Separation Anxiety be Prevented?

The best way to prevent separation anxiety is to train the dog to be alone when he is a puppy.

- Start by leaving him alone for a few seconds in another room with the door shut and build up time, just a few seconds, then a few minutes, until he is comfortable for 30 minute to an hour. Then do the same by leaving the house. Try and do this several times a day and vary the times – morning, afternoons, night time.
- Make sure that everyone in the household practices the absences – individually and together.
- Don't make a big thing about coming home – the more exciting it is when the owner comes home, the harder it is for the dog to cope when he is alone.
- NEVER punish him if he has toileted or destroyed anything – he can't help it – he was just trying to cope.
- Give the dog as much freedom in the house as it is safe to do. If you have to confine the dog for safety then leave him in a room with nothing around for him to chew or destroy.

If nothing you do helps your dog, seek the advice of a qualified behaviourist who will develop a behaviour modification programme to help your dog be home alone and happy.