

Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is a common behavioral problem often resulting in the relinquishment of one's dog, physical abuse due to frustration or even euthanasia, which is why it is important for people to understand this widespread dilemma. Not every dog that is destructive necessarily has SA, other issues can lead to destruction of your property by your dog such as teething, puppy play, lack of exercise or just plain boredom. This is why it is so important to choose the right dog for your lifestyle. So how do you distinguish the difference between actual SA and other underlying causes of destructive behavior? A dog with true SA will not only exhibit signs of anxiety and stress while the owner is gone, but also while the owner is home but is separated from the dog.

The following are signs that your dog may suffer from SA:

- Your dog follows you wherever you go in the house (sticks to you like velcro).
- Your dog gets really worked up and anxious when you are preparing to leave the house.
- When you arrive home the dog greets you with an excessive display of emotion.
- The dog displays destructive behavior while separated from you.
- Vocalizations such as barking/howling/whining
- House soiling or diarrhea
- Vomiting
- Excessive salivation
- Digging
- Attempts to escape to reach their owner
- Self mutilation, such as excessive licking/chewing their extremities.

There are two treatments that are used when working with a dog with SA. Behavioral modification, and if necessary medical intervention. Since dogs with SA suffer from a lack of confidence, it is important to implement confidence building exercises into their training regimen. This can be done by teaching your dog new tricks, taking them on regularly scheduled walks, grooming on a regular basis, and most importantly adhering to a strictly scheduled routine (feeding, exercise, and otherwise) with your dog so they know when to expect what. For example, they should be walked at the same time every day, fed at the same time every day, and should be able to know with confidence what each day will bring. Constant turbulence in their daily schedule will only shake their confidence in you as an owner and a leader, thus creating more anxiety for them.

Another important part of treating SA is providing the dog with plenty of physical and mental stimulation. Exercising your dog and teaching them to heel is a very important part of boosting their confidence and gaining their trust in you as their pack leader. Teaching them basic obedience and even some tricks if you have time, gives them the mental workout that they need to feel fulfilled. With these vital pieces of treatment most dogs can recover fully with a program that suits them without having to intervene with medications.

Behavioral Modification Program

The owner should start by having an area in the house where the dog learns to stay while you are home. This is where teaching your dog the 'stay' command comes in handy. The dog should learn to perceive this as a good area, where they get treats and other distractions (toys). The dog should only get these treats/distractions while they are in the designated area so they can associate being separated from you with getting fun toys to play with. If necessary you can have the dog tied to or crated in their area to keep them there in the beginning. Be prepared for them to be upset at first and it is very important that you pay no attention to this anxious and unnecessary behavior (completely ignore them). This takes time and persistence on your part, but it is very important that you hold to the new boundaries and remain consistent. If the dog gets what they want (attention), even once, then they will continue to try to push the boundaries thus making it much more difficult to achieve your goal. Once you have achieved success with keeping the dog separated from you while you are in the home then you can start leaving the dog alone in the house for short intervals (2minutes), and

gradually building their way up to longer and longer periods. This helps the dog to understand that their owner will really come back and it gradually desensitizes the dog to the separation. It is important that you not leave the dog too long in the beginning- you do not want to come back in the home when they are displaying anxious behavior if you can avoid it. If this means you can only leave the house for 10 seconds at first, then start there- Each dog is different and this program should be modified to reflect your individual situation.

Some dogs become anxious and upset over things that you do in preparation of leaving the house. For example, putting your shoes on, the sound of jingling keys, putting your coat on, etc. In these cases, you can help desensitize your pet to these individual rituals by doing them often, even when you are not leaving. Pick up your keys and just walk around the house, put your coat on and then sit and watch some TV- If you do this on a regular basis the pet will get more and more used to these things and not associate them with the stress of you leaving.

It is also important to avoid engaging with the dog while they are in an anxious state. Keep in mind that every time you give your dog attention it is equivalent to you giving them a treat. You wouldn't give your dog a biscuit while he is jumping all over you, clawing you and acting crazy (or you shouldn't anyways), so the same goes for giving them attention. Only provide them with this "treat" when they deserve it.

When you leave the house, you should do so nonchalantly. The more attention and excitement that you give them before you leave and as you return home, the more difficult it will be for them to calm down once you are gone or have arrived. As a rule, I ignore my dogs for 10 minutes prior to leaving and I leave the house without a word. Once you arrive home it is also very important that you not engage in their excitement to see you. You should walk in the house and go about your business until the dog has calmed down, at which point, you can approach them calmly and give them attention and take them out for a walk. Basically, you should ignore any anxious, excitable, or unwanted behavior and only enforce calm and balanced behavior.

While you are out of the home it is important to provide your dog with some mental stimulation, which helps increase their confidence and gives them something to do while you are away. There are many different things that you can do to provide your dog with stimulation while you are away.

- As you are leaving the house put down their food so they will start to look forward to you leaving instead of dreading it. You can put a spin on this as well by moistening their regular portion of food the night before and stuffing it in a large Kong to leave with them as you walk out the door. This will distract them longer and make them work for their food.
- Some dogs will refuse food when they are stressed, but trust me on this, a dog will be motivated by food if they are hungry enough. It is important that you pick up their food when you are home and only allow access to it when you are gone. They may skip a couple days of eating, but they will eventually eat the food and then you can use it as a regular distraction as they get used to the new routine.
- There are many treat dispensing toys on the market today. These are great for keeping them busy and providing some mental stimulation while you are out.
- Leave the radio on the classical station. Research has found this to relax animals in stressful situations.
- Leave something with your scent on it to help soothe them.
- Provide your dog with a crate that has fresh bedding. I have found that insecure dogs often find comfort in their crate (den) and always allow them access to their crate so they can use it as they please.

IMPORTANT!! When you leave your dog provide them with these fun treats and toys, but when you arrive home all of the toys/treats **MUST** get picked up. The toys and treats are not going to be nearly as tempting if they have access to them all of the time. This will help them to associate your leaving as a positive experience, instead of a dreaded one.

Medical Intervention

Some animals have such high anxiety levels that they require prescribed medication by your veterinarian to help overcome their issues. This is not a magic pill that will make SA disappear, but it is something that can be added to the program when needed. Exercise and mental stimulation are still very important and vital to your dog's recovery.

There are also natural supplements that you can purchase over the counter that can be combined with the behavioral modification program. I have used the following which

have proven to be quite helpful and effective additions to the program.

- Calming tablets are natural supplements that help to take the edge off anxious animals and I have found them to be very useful when working with anxious dogs. Total Pet Health Calming Tablets can be found at www.petedge.com
- Melatonin is an over the counter remedy that can be useful in treating SA and can be found at health food stores. It should be given no more than three times a day, at eight-hour intervals, as needed.

Small dogs should be given 0.5 to 1 mg

Medium-sized dogs should be given 1 to 3 mg

Large dogs should be given 3 to 9 mg

The other treatment, of course, is prescribed medication. Medication should NOT be the sole treatment for separation anxiety. The owner must also work with their dog's behavior.

In conclusion, dogs with SA are dogs that are truly suffering and require your patience and understanding to bring an end to their affliction. Don't forget that dogs are like sponges and are always soaking in your energy and taking in the emotions that you are giving off. It is very important to remain calm and positive when working with your dog in order to create a calm and confident companion animal. Animals are only as good as the people that are working with them so if you feel like you are getting angry or frustrated (especially after coming home to destruction), give yourself a break, take some deep breaths, and calm down before continuing. Your animal will reflect your ability to control yourself. If you can't control yourself then you won't be able to control your dog.