

CAN THEY LOVE YOU TOO MUCH?... SEPARATION ANXIETY IN DOGS

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Dogs have long been touted as “man’s best friend.” This is in part due to the strong social bonds that are formed between humans and their dogs. Attachment behaviors are necessary for animals whose survival is benefitted by group interactions as they serve to maintain social cohesion. When a social animal is separated from its companions, it is normal for that animal to engage in a distress response. Dogs that exhibit excessive distress responses when separated from their companions are classified as exhibiting separation anxiety.

The clinical signs associated with separation anxiety include:

- excessive vocalization
- elimination
- destructive behavior
- anorexia
- hyper-salivation
- pacing
- depression/inactivity
- excessive greetings upon the owner’s return

All of these clinical signs are only expressed when the dog is left alone, usually within the first few minutes of being left alone. The owner usually reports that the dog is “perfect” when they are at home. A thorough history and video tape of the dog when left alone can help to accurately diagnose the problem. In addition, dogs with separation anxiety often exhibit distress as the owners are preparing to leave. Trembling, closely following the owner, salivating and pacing just prior to the owner’s departure can help to complete the clinical picture. Any of the above clinical signs could be associated with other conditions. Listed below are other possible diagnoses for some of the clinical signs associated with separation anxiety:

Possible causes of inappropriate elimination behaviors in the house:

- Medical problem (bladder infection, kidney failure, etc.)
- Separation anxiety
- Housebreaking
- Lack of opportunity
- Fear
- Marking
- Incontinence

Possible causes of destructive behaviors:

- Playful behavior

- Puppy chewing/exploration
- Escape behavior to roam
- Separation anxiety

Possible causes of excessive vocalization:

- Reaction to stimuli
- Socially facilitated
- Play
- Territorial aggression
- Separation Anxiety
- Fear

Some owners report that their dog was fine for several years before developing signs associated with separation anxiety. In these cases it is important to look for certain historical factors that may have contributed to the onset of the problem. Common triggers include a change in schedules, a negative experience occurring when the owner was absent or cognitive dysfunction of elderly dogs.

Prevention of separation anxiety can be attempted by gradually exposing puppies to separation from their human counterparts. Start with short departures. To increase the odds of a successful, anxiety-free departure, exercise the puppy prior to your absence, leave the puppy in a comfortable safe environment, give the puppy a reward upon your departure and keep departure/greetings low key.

Once a definitive diagnosis of separation anxiety has been established, a treatment plan involves the same basic principles that are used with any fear-related condition, that is, having the dog experience the situations that have previously elicited anxiety without being afraid or anxious. In essence, the dog is to be desensitized and counter conditioned to departures. The following list includes behavioral modification techniques to treat separation anxiety:

- desensitize to pre-departure cues
- graduated departures
- give a tasty, long-lasting food treat upon departure
- ignore dog for 10 minutes prior to departure and upon return home
- don't punish the dog for behaviors associated with anxiety
- consult veterinarian regarding anxiolytic medication (Clomicalm)
- doggie daycare

In summary, it is important to remember that many other conditions may mimic separation anxiety. Once separation anxiety has been definitively diagnosed, a treatment program designed to target the underlying anxiety is the most appropriate method of dealing with this condition.