

Separation Anxiety

Does the thought of leaving your pet alone in your home send shivers down your spine? Do you wonder what new objects your furry friend will find to destroy while you're away? Have you had enough, but you don't know what to do? Well, read on, your pet may have separation anxiety and there are training techniques that can help Fido learn that it's OK to be "home alone".

First, we need to discern whether Fluffy actually has separation anxiety or if he is just bored.

With boredom, we typically see:

1. A dog that has little outlet for running/romping/expending energy every single day (this is equally important for all dogs, but especially important for pooches that are destroying objects due to boredom. A tired dog is a happy dog!
2. Often, more destruction happens the longer the pet is left alone. Boredom becomes worse over longer time frames. Things destroyed typically include any objects that are left lying around.
3. Bored dogs may or may not have other signs of anxiety.

With separation anxiety, we usually see:

1. A dog that tends to be "clingy" and often "shadows" our every move.
2. A dog that sometimes shows signs of anxiety in other situations.
3. A dog that destroys objects no matter how long you are gone, often within the first 5 to 30 minutes (this is when their anxiety is most intense).
4. Destroyed objects often escalate past objects left lying around and progress to chewing or clawing flooring, walls, couches and sometimes even going through windows.
5. Severe separation anxiety may result in urinating, defecating or profuse drooling.

If you are unsure whether your dog is just untrained and bored or has separation anxiety, please contact a veterinarian with a background in behavior or an animal behavior specialist for a consultation.

It is incredibly important to recognize that if your pet has separation anxiety, he or she may have a very serious panic disorder. Just as with people, some pets are born with anxious temperaments and need help to overcome these traits. However, there are many socialization and training errors we humans make that cause symptoms of anxiety to worsen in these pets and can even CAUSE them in completely normal animals. Let's look at the common errors people tend to make:

1. **Not Being An Effective Leader:** This doesn't mean you need to "dominate" your dog. It means that you learn about positive reinforcement training and how to shape behaviors you want and discourage behaviors you don't want. When dogs don't have consistency and knowledgeable, effective leadership, they tend to become anxious. The fact is that the majority of dogs DO NOT want to be leaders. We have selectively bred dogs not to be "Alpha". But, through ignorance, we tend to force them into this position. See www.safeharborvet.com: Links: Behavior and Training for more information on how to become a positive leader for your dog.
2. **Punishing the Dog "After the Fact":** This means that you come home, see the destruction, and immediately yell at, or worse, physically punish your pet for their misdeed. If you want the BEST and QUICKEST way to make an anxiety disorder WORSE then DO THIS. Your pet, no matter how "guilty" he or she looks, DOES NOT associate your anger with their

earlier actions. All they know is that you're home and you're angry. The "guilty" look they are giving you is submission. When a dog lowers his head, avoids eye contact and flattens his ears and tail what he is saying is: "I know you're mad, I recognize you're the boss, Please don't hurt me".

Pets ARE capable of making the following association: Mess + Mom/Dad Home = Anger. They are NOT capable of associating: My Action of Chewing on the Couch Earlier + Mom/Dad Home = Anger.

3. Not Seeking Help: Now listen carefully - If dogs could make the aforementioned association - they would not engage in the activity that made you so upset. I want you to go take a good look at your dog. Do you honestly believe he is actively thinking of ways to spite you right now? Ridiculous thought, isn't it? You are the "smarter" of the two species in the room. If you are having a behavior problem with your pet that you can't solve - GET HELP from a knowledgeable veterinarian or behavior specialist who understands positive reinforcement training/behavior shaping/operant conditioning.

OK, so now we know the ways we can make the situation worse. How exactly are we going to make it better? What follows is a list of basic behavior modifications you can perform at home that will help your pet overcome their separation anxiety if it is a mild case. For moderate to severe anxiety (severe shadowing, destruction of walls/carpet/couches or windows, drooling, defecating or urinating), your pet will likely need anxiety medication so they can learn new behaviors.

Behavior Modification for Separation Anxiety:

1. Obedience classes with an instructor who understands positive reinforcement, behavior shaping and operant conditioning. If your instructor can't explain to you what these words mean, find a better instructor. The more you can learn how to communicate with your dog appropriately, the more confident he or she will become.
2. Learn to Become an Effective Leader.
3. Don't make a big deal about leaving. Ignore your dog for about five minutes prior to departure and simply leave.
4. Leave a wonderful treat that takes your dog at LEAST 10 minutes to eat completely. A food or treat puzzle (Buster Cube or similar) or Kong toy with natural peanut butter smeared on the inside or soaked and frozen kibble stuffed inside that your pet only gets to enjoy when you leave. The treat must be taken away when you come home.
5. DO NOT -EVER- punish your pet if you come home to a mess. See number 2 above. Place your pet in another room and quietly clean up the destruction. Remember, your pet can't help herself. Take a deep breath, count to 20 and develop a plan for avoiding the destruction next time.
6. Exercise, Exercise, Exercise. Get out, go for a run. Try Agility, Freestyle obedience or flyball classes. Join the dog park. Whatever it takes.
7. Do not give your pet attention when he asks for it. Ignore attempts to force you to pet him. Three to five times daily go and seek out your pet. Give him attention for being calm and quiet.
8. Discourage shadowing behavior. Do not allow your pet to follow you everywhere for short periods throughout the day. Accomplish this using leashes or baby gates in certain rooms. Make initial sessions very short. Shut your pet out of the bathroom when you are using it. Practice "Down/Stays" and "Sit/Stays" after you have learned them in obedience class or with a private instructor.
9. Do not make a big deal about returning home. Wait for your pet to calm down before greeting. Give her a chew toy to keep her occupied if necessary. Don't forget to greet her quietly and calmly after she has settled down.

10. Desensitize your pet to objects that indicate you are leaving. For example, have you noticed that your pet gets excited or starts becoming anxious when you pick up your keys or put your coat on? If so, practice picking up and setting down your keys over and over and over many times on lots of different days. You should start to notice that after several repetitions, your pet learns to ignore this sign that you are leaving.

11. If you are not making progress or your pet's behavior is worsening, please contact a professional.

Can you imagine how terrible it would be to live your life in an almost constant state of panic? Pets with separation anxiety need help! Don't let another day go by without seeking assistance for your four-legged family member.