

Separation Anxiety

By Diane Jarvis

How many of us have come home from a long day at work to find our beloved Fido sitting in the middle of a mess? Chewed furniture, windowsills and shoes, overturned garbage, scratches on doors, and perhaps even a message on the phone from a neighbor tired of non-stop barking.

Worse, our happy-to-see-us friend is now cowering and quivering as our shock turns to anger. It may appear that he knows what he's done is wrong, or we may think it happened because he is angry or "getting back" at us for something. Not so, he is merely responding to your reaction. And he may suffer from separation anxiety.

Separation anxiety can be one of the most frustrating and perplexing things for dog guardians to deal with, and results in thousands of dogs being turned into shelters each year. But understanding the nature of the beast (literally) can help you and your dog deal with it effectively.

It is unknown for certain why some dogs develop separation anxiety and others don't. Lack of proper socialization as puppies, abuse, multiple homes, change in routine, or loss of a canine companion can all trigger the behavior. The severity of the anxiety and behaviors vary from dog to dog, but it is always emotionally distressing and requires patience, kindness and conditioning to overcome.

If you bring home a new puppy, help him become accustomed to being alone by crate training. Resist picking up the puppy if it cries or whines, even on the first night home. By picking him up, you will be teaching him that vocalization brings attention and create a dog that pitches a fit when left alone! Instead, go to the pup when he is quiet.

Throughout your training make sure the dog has plenty of potty breaks, attention, and engaging toys. Condition him to be alone, away from other dogs and family members. Don't allow the dog to become "hyperattached" by following you from room to room, expecting to be held and given treats. Show lots of love and attention, but at the times of your choosing. Be consistent, don't scold one time and reward the next for any undesirable behaviors such as excessive barking or jumping up.

If you think your dog suffers from separation anxiety the first step is a trip to your veterinarian to check for health problems. Often the most effective approach to solving separation anxiety is a combination of behavior modification and anti-anxiety medication. As with any medication it is important to give it consistently (not just when the dog seems anxious) and give it time to work. There are also homeopathic remedies available for calming and de-stressing. Your vet may be able to help you with behavior modification exercises or recommend a behavior specialist or trainer.

Some of the exercises may include helping the dog relax when alone. Provide special treats or desirable toys that are only accessible when you are not present. The use of a Dog Appeasement Pheromone diffuser can be helpful. It is a plug-in scent-releasing devise that produces a

genetically engineered scent (similar to a mother dog) making your dog feel relaxed and that everything is fine. Leaving a radio or TV on may also create a sense of comfort,

Desensitize your dog to separation by learning the “cues” that indicate you will be leaving. Whether it is your morning ritual of a shower, certain clothes for work, or taking out the car keys you can help the dog by going through the motions, leaving, and then coming in again after a few minutes. Remaining calm and not creating a lot of hoopla helps the dog be less anxious with your leaving.

Avoid stern warnings to be good and emotional farewells. Your dog picks up on your feelings of guilt or anger and becomes more anxious. The same applies to your return. Although it may make you feel good, don't encourage the wild greetings. Jumping, barking and running in circles may make you feel loved, but if encouraged it can lead to scratched doors, damaged windows, or even aggression towards other pets and people. Come into your house quietly and let your dog know your homecoming is a normal event, not an excuse to go bananas.

Above all, understand that anxiety or fear causes the inappropriate behavior. Scolding or punishing the dog after the fact only causes more anxiety and fear – of you and your return. Suddenly the dog associates your coming home with scolding and punishment. Slowly, and lovingly, reconditioning your dog (and yourself) is the key to dealing with separation anxiety.