Separation Anxiety

Dogs with separation anxiety exhibit problems when they are left alone. Usually, their anxiety response will occur within 20-45 minutes after their owners leave. The most common behaviors are: digging/ chewing/ scratching at doors and windows, howling/ barking/ crying, and urination and defecation (even with housetrained dogs).

What to Do

If you suspect that your dog may have separation anxiety, you should have a discussion with your vet to see what they recommend.

For a minor separation anxiety problem, the following techniques should be helpful. For more severe problems, these techniques should be used with the desensitization process described in the next section.

1. Keep arrivals low key. You can try ignoring your dog at first and then petting them when they calm down.

2. Give your dog an article of clothing that smells like you, such as an old shirt you slept in recently.

3. Establish a "safety cue" – a word/ action that you use every time you leave to let your dog know you'll be back. Dogs usually learn to associate certain cues with short absences of their owners. For example, when you take out the trash, your dog knows that you'll be right back and won't get anxious. Therefore, establishing a safety cue for practice departures and short-duration absences is helpful. Some examples of safety cues are: leaving a radio or television on, or giving them a safe toy or bone. A bone may be a good choice for a dog that is destructive. Don't use   the safety cue for an absence that will be longer than your dog can tolerate.

Why Do Dogs Suffer from Separation Anxiety?

While it's not fully understood why some dogs have dramatic responses, these behaviors are not your dog's attempt to punish you for leaving them alone. It is simply a panic response.

Separation Anxiety sometimes occurs when:

1. A dog has never or rarely been left alone

2. The owner is away from the dog for an extended period, such as a vacation

3. After a traumatic event, such as spending time at a shelter or boarding kennel

4. There is a change in the family's routine or structure (change in work schedule, a child goes to college, moving to a new home, new pet or person in the house, etc.)

How Do I Know if My Dog has Separation Anxiety?

Your dog most likely has separation anxiety if most, or all, of the following statements are true:

1. The behavior always occurs when your dog is left alone, no matter how long.

2. Your dog follows you from room to room.

3. Your dog displays frantic greeting behaviors.

4. Your dog reacts with excitement, depression, or anxiety as you prepare to leave.

5. Your dog dislikes spending time outdoors alone.

Desensitization Techniques

The primary treatment for more severe separation anxiety is a systematic process of getting your dog used to being alone. You must teach your dog to remain calm during practice departures and short absences. Here is a recommended procedure:

1. Begin by engaging in your normal departure activities (getting your keys, putting on your coat, etc.), then sit back down. Repeat this step until your dog shows no signs of distress.

2. Next, engage in your normal departure routine, go to the door, open it, then sit back down.

3. Step outside the door, leaving it open, and then return.

4. Finally, step outside, close the door, and immediately return. Slowly get your dog accustomed to being alone with the door closed for several seconds.

5. Proceed very gradually from step to step, repeating each step until your dog shows no signs of distress. If your dog begins to show signs of anxiety, you have moved too quickly. Return to the previous step and repeat until your dog seems comfortable. Then continue to the next step.

6. When your dog is tolerating being alone behind the door, begin short-duration absences. Give your dog a verbal cue ("I'll be back" for example), leave and then return within a minute. Your return should be low key: ignore your dog or greet them quietly. Repeat until your dog shows no signs of distress. Gradually increase the length of time you're gone. Practice as many absences as possible that last less than ten minutes. You can do multiple during one day if your dog calms down sufficiently between departures.

7. Once your dog can handle short absences (30 – 90 minutes), they'll usually be able to handle longer intervals alone. The hard part is the beginning, but it gets easier as you go. However, you must go slowly in the beginning. How long this process takes depends on the severity of the problem.

Humane Fort Wayne
4914 S. Hanna St, Fort Wayne, IN 46806 · 1333 Maycrest Dr, Fort Wayne, IN 46805
260-744-0454 & 260-420-7729 · info@humanefw.org
www.HumaneFW.org

Interim Solutions

Because these treatments can take a while, these are some suggestions to help in the short term:

1. Practicing the Sit-Stay and Down-Stay exercises with your dog. Gradually increase the distance you move away from your dog. Your goal is to move out of your dog's sight while they remain in the "stay" position, and teaching your dog to remain calm when you move to another place. As you progress, you can practice this during normal daily activities. For example, if you want to get up from the couch for a snack, tell your dog to stay. When you come back, praise them and give them a treat.
2. Talk to your vet about anti-anxiety medications.
3. Take your dog to a day care facility/boarding kennel, or leave with a family member or neighbor.
4. Take your dog to work with you, even for a half day, if possible.

What Not To Do for Separation Anxiety

1. Punishment is not effective for dealing with separation anxiety. It can actually make things worse.
2. Crating your dog will not stop your dog from feeling anxious. Your dog may even injure themselves by trying to escape.
3. Obedience school. While obedience training is always a good idea, it won't fix a separation anxiety problem since it is a panic response.