

SEPARATION ANXIETY IN DOGS

AMERICAN KENNEL CLUB

July 16, 2015

Separation anxiety in dogs goes beyond the occasional mournful whimper when you leave the house or the mysterious appearance, now and then, of a bedroom slipper under the kitchen table when you return. Unlike a little mischief when your dog is left alone, separation anxiety is the result of real stress. If your dog exhibits some of these behaviors when you're not there, he is most likely suffering from separation anxiety:

- Excessive barking or howling
- Destructive acts, like chewing furniture, pillows or clothing and frantic scratching on the doors or windows
- Indoor 'accidents'--urinating or defecating in the house
- Excessive salivation, drooling or panting
- Intense pacing
- If crated, escape attempts so desperate, the dog may actually harm himself

These behaviors aren't occasional; they happen every time you leave and only in your absence. In fact, they may begin even before you leave; when he sees you put on a coat or take out the car keys.

WHAT CAUSES SEPARATION ANXIETY IN DOGS?

It's unclear why some dogs are more prone to separation anxiety. There's some anecdotal evidence to suggest it's more common in shelter dogs, who may have been abandoned or suffered the loss of an important person in the past. Some breeds may also be more prone to it, especially the more-people oriented breeds. Life changes can also cause separation anxiety, including a sudden change in the schedule, a move to a new house or the sudden absence of a family member, whether it's a divorce, a death in the family or even a child going off to college.

HOW DO I HELP MY DOG?

Neither you nor your dog wants this constant cycle to continue. It's difficult seeing a beloved pet under so much stress and just as difficult to come home to mayhem and destruction. While there's no magic bullet, there are some things you can try.

Conditioning: In some cases, you can try to relieve his anxiety by teaching him that separation has its rewards. Right now, he's conditioned to go into stress mode when he knows you're leaving him. Try countering that reaction by leaving him a special treat, like a bone or toy stuffed with peanut butter or something else he loves. You can even leave small treats around the house for him to discover. Make sure his toys, bed, blanket and anything else he likes are near at hand.

If he's a puppy, start conditioning him early by leaving him for short periods of time and gradually lengthening the amount of time you're gone. Some dogs feel safer and more comfortable in their crate when left alone. Watch his behavior in the crate to see if he settles right down or if the anxiety symptoms ramp up.

Exercise: Make sure he gets plenty of exercise, both physical and mental. A tired, contented dog, who's had a brisk walk and playtime with you is more likely to settle down when you leave.

Medication: Sometimes, no amount of training and conditioning will help, especially with older dogs. Some vets recommend medication like amitriptyline, which is used to treat depression, or alprazolam, which is prescribed for anxiety and panic disorders.

Herbal & homeopathic treatments: Another option is natural supplements and homeopathic treatment. Natural supplements that help ease anxiety in dogs include the amino acid L-theanine, chamomile, passionflower, St. John's Wort and valerian. These basically function to alter neurotransmitters in the brain (such as serotonin, GABA, or dopamine) to induce a sense of peace and calm.

In moderate to severe cases of separation anxiety, you might have to try a combination of medication and behavioral therapy. It can be a complicated process, so consider working with a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist or a veterinary behaviorist.

Separation anxiety isn't always preventable, despite your best efforts. But with patience and care, you may be able to reduce your dog's suffering and the destructive behaviors it causes.
