

# Separation Anxiety

Separation Anxiety is a term often misused. Dogs who prefer to be with their owners, bark, eliminate in the home, or destroy household items are sometimes said to have Separation Anxiety (SA), but we must first determine if that is indeed what is going on for the dog.

## **Some common behavior problems to rule out with a trainer before treating for SA include**

- Submissive or excitement urination – usually happens during greetings or play rather than when left alone.
- Incomplete house training or marking
- Juvenile destruction – many young dogs chew, dig or act destructively when left alone as can older dogs.
- Boredom
- Barking & howling in response to triggers from the environment – such as unfamiliar sights and sounds – will usually happen when the owner is present as well.

## **Common symptoms of SA include several of the behaviors listed below:**

- Urinating and defecating in the home when left alone but not in the presence of the owner
- Barking and howling when left alone or when separated from the owner
- Chewing, digging and destruction, primarily around door frames or window sills, when the owner is not present. This behavior can often result in self injury such as broken teeth, cut or scraped paws or damaged nails.
- Escaping from an area where he has been confined when left alone or separated from the owner. Sometimes however, this same dog will be fine once given the “run of the house”.
- Pacing or drooling when left alone
- Increased anxiety right before the owner leaves the home

## **Treating Separation Anxiety**

- Increase exercise
- Nothing in Life is Free – ask your dog to perform some reward-able behavior before giving them any treats, food, or attention.
- Utilize food puzzles, frozen treat dispensing toys, or frozen food bowls (kibble in water or broth then frozen) to feed the dog all his food while you are gone.
- Feed him only when you leave or in an area away from you. We want him to understand that good things happen when you are not present.

- Implement daily routines and structure to help your nervous dog feel more secure.
- Discourage him from following you around the house.
- Teach “place” to encourage your dog to spend time away from you even when you are spending time in the same room. “Place” asks your dog to go to a bed or mat and stay there until he is allowed to move around freely again. You can utilize a tether initially if needed to keep your dog on place. Once he is calm on place with you in the room, you can start to leave the room for short periods of time.
- Be as boring as possible, especially when you are leaving or coming home. For instance, do not pay attention to him immediately upon arriving home but rather ignore him initially and wait to give him attention 15 minutes or so afterwards.
- Identify the triggers or cues that make him anxious about you leaving and work on desensitizing him to those triggers. Pick up your purse or briefcase and carry it around the house. Jingle your keys while you make dinner or watch TV. Put on your shoes and walk to the door but don’t leave...etc.
- Be cautious utilizing a crate, with severe separation anxiety a crate can invoke panic. Consult with a trainer for help acclimating your dog to a crate if you need to utilize one. Some dogs do better left alone loose in the home rather than confined to a crate or single room in the house.
- Some dogs benefit from another dog in the home. If you don’t already have another dog at home, does he have a canine companion with whom you can test this possibility.
- Does he prefer one person in the family over the others? Have the others in the home feed, play and walk with him. We want him to learn that other people have value and provide “the good stuff” to encourage bonds with others instead of a hyper-bond with just one person.

## **Drills, Games & Exercises**

- Play interactive games (like fetch or tug) with your dog and give them plenty of exercise.
- Hide food or treats for your dog to find around the house or yard.
- Enroll in an obedience class with your dog to help learn new skills, provide mental stimulation to your dog, establish boundaries and expectations, and to improve your bond with your dog.
- Utilize hunting scent lures to engage your dogs’ sense of smell.
- Nest cardboard boxes with treats sprinkled in them so that he can hunt for the treats and shred the boxes.
- Put a squirrel feeder outside a window where your dog can watch them.

## The Use of Medication

The single most effective manner to treat separation anxiety in your dog is to couple behavior modification together with pharmaceutical therapy. Consult your veterinarian regarding anti-anxiety medication. Often this medication can help your dog learn to spend time by himself *while* you practice the techniques listed above. Some medications can take several weeks to support your dog but others can have a more immediate effect. Discuss the options with your veterinarian.

When medication together with behavioral support is used, your chances for treating separation anxiety are at its best. There is not an overnight “fix” so planning ways for your dog to spend more time with you, initially, will help you get started. Can he go to work with you or can you work from home? Can he go to a doggy daycare or pet sitter? Can he go to a friend’s house during the day while you are at work? This is likely just an exercise to do initially so that you can accustom your dog to brief periods away from you and avoid longer periods of time until your dog gradually becomes accustomed to some time by himself.