

SEPARATION ANXIETY

Don McKeown, Andrew Luescher & Mary Machum
Department of Population Medicine
Ontario Veterinary College
(519) 823-8800 Ext. 4041

Dogs are social animals, and form strong attachments to other dogs and to people. The dog's first experience with separation anxiety is when the pup is separated from its mother and littermates. New owners expect their puppy to be restless the first few nights he spends in his new home. In later life, problems arise when a dependant dog has a strong attachment to one person. The owners are kindly people who spend a lot of time with their dog; they allow it to follow them around the house, and appreciate the excited welcome the dog gives them when they return home. Unwanted behavior often starts when the owner's schedule changes so that the dog is left alone more frequently, or at different times, than he is used to.

Signs of separation anxiety are only seen in the owner's absence, or when the dog is prevented from being close to the owner (for example, at night). The dog is in a high state of anxiety or conflict because he wants to be with the owner and is prevented from doing so. Dogs, like people, cannot stay in a high state of anxiety for long, and must do something to reduce the tension. While you or I might have a relaxing bath, go for a run, or have a drink, the dog can only do "doggy" things to reduce tension. Things dogs do to reduce tension include:

- chewing, digging or licking, which cause destruction in the home
- hyperactivity (pacing)
- reduced activity levels, depression, loss of appetite
- urination or defecation
- diarrhea, vomiting or constipation
- aggression when the owner leaves (mouthing, growling, nipping)

It is important to realize that the dog is not doing these things to get even with you for leaving him, out of boredom, or due to a lack of obedience. Consider instead that his dependance on you is so great that he becomes anxious when you leave. He must relieve this tension, and his methods of doing so may cause considerable damage. Also consider that, no matter how flattering his constant attention to you may seem, it is not fair to the dog to allow him to be so stressed by your absence that he must respond with one of these unwanted behaviors.

TREATMENT OF SEPARATION ANXIETY - What DOESN'T Work

1. Many people wonder about getting a pet for their pet, so the dog won't be lonely while they are out. This does not work, because the excessively tight bonding is between you and your dog, not between another animal and your dog. Having company has no effect on the distress your dog feels when you leave.
2. Punishment does not work. Dogs do not make the association between making a mess and being punished for it at a later time. They also cannot reason that if they don't make a mess in the future, they won't be punished. Even though your dog may look "guilty" when you come home to a mess, he has learned that when you are present and a mess exists, he is in trouble. If someone who had never scolded your dog went into your house, and a mess was present, the dog would not look guilty.
3. Tying the dog to chewed objects, or painting them with hot sauce, may stop him from chewing them. However, the tension he feels will be redirected elsewhere.