



HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY

Behavior Modification Handout

Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is not as common of a problem as you might think. Some behavior problems that develop whenever a dog is left alone are often mistakenly labeled “separation anxiety.” Fear of being left alone can trigger anxiety and stress in your pet and a result of this extreme stress can be destructive behavior. The type of destructive behavior seen in separation anxiety cases is usually on a higher scale than just random inappropriate chewing. It is important to remember your dog is not reacting this way out of spite or anger at being left alone. He is reacting to a phobia (fear of being left alone) and having a panic response.

Behaviors Associated With Separation Anxiety

An accurate diagnosis of separation anxiety should be determined prior to attempting any behavior modification plan with your pet. You may notice some or all of these behaviors in your pet if he is suffering from separation anxiety:

- A shadow dog – he follows you around the house and is uncomfortable when you are out of his sight.
- He may show signs of stress like panting or hyper-salivation when you are preparing to leave the house.
- When you return home greetings may be frantic and your dog may take longer to return to normal calm behavior.
- Indiscriminate house soiling (especially in a dog that is house trained).
- Significant destructive behavior – chewing door moldings, tearing out door or window screens, digging up carpet at doorways. This type of destruction occurs from the dog’s attempts to escape from the house to find you.
- Howling, excessive barking or crying when you are gone.
- Most destructive behavior will happen within 30 minutes to an hour after you have left.
- All or most of the destructive behavior happens when the dog is left alone.

Triggers or Probable Causes of Separation Anxiety

Anxiety and stress can be triggered by certain conditions in your pet’s environment.

- Moving into a new house or apartment, especially if significantly spatially different than his previous home.
- A change in schedule or routine.
- A visit to the veterinarian (hospital stay), boarding or other period of time that your pet is separated from you (separation may have been traumatic or scary).
- A change in the family – son goes off to college, another pet dies or someone new moves in.
- A dog that has been re-homed after living in a shelter environment.

There are many reasons that can be associated with the on- set of separation anxiety and we may never be able to identify them all. Your pet is unique and there are many fluctuating behaviors and events in his life that will influence how he deals with stress. It will be critical to decrease your pet's stress at being left alone in order to effectively deal with his separation anxiety issues.

Reducing Anxiety and Building Confidence

There are several exercises and training opportunities that you can practice with your pet. These exercises will help to reduce his stress and build his confidence while preparing him to better deal with being left alone.

- Strengthen basic obedience commands sit, down and stay. Teaching your dog this will enable you to work on increasing distance between you and your pet. He completes a sit, down and stays while you slowly back away. You will gradually work up to being able to leave the room for short periods of time.
- Practice unemotional hello's and goodbye's. Most owners actually can make matters worse by being very emotional and there-by reinforcing the anxious behavior. Hello and goodbye should be non-events. Ignoring the dog for several minutes and then only briefly acknowledging the dog when leaving or coming home.
- Mock departures are an extension of the unemotional hello and goodbye exercise. You should practice leaving the house for a couple of minutes and then returning. Gradually increase the time you are gone as the dog becomes less aroused by the activity. This will help to make the dog more comfortable with the idea that you are not leaving forever and you will be back.
- Mix it up! Change your departure routine frequently. Avoid always going through the same routine; get your keys, put your jacket on, grab your bag. Most of us have a set of things we do consistently when preparing to leave. Your dog will easily pick up on these cues and start to anticipate you leaving. This sets the stage for your dog to become anxious. You may also practice going through these cues and then just sitting down and not leaving at all. This will make departures less predictable for your dog. These types of exercises need to be repeated very frequently (10 or more times a day) and desensitizing your pet could take weeks. There is no quick fix for separation anxiety.
- Leaving a TV or radio on to provide background noise can block out neighborhood noise like traffic, doors slamming, other dogs barking, that might stimulate your dog. It can also simulate normal household activity similar to when you are home. Avoid loud music or TV programs and make sure whatever you play is soft and soothing. This may only sooth a nervous dog and may not be helpful with severe cases of separation anxiety.
- Creating a stress free environment during training and a calm non-stimulating environment when you are gone is beneficial in reducing anxious behaviors. A cool, dimly lit and quite area can stimulate sleep cycles in your pet.

- Provide interesting chew toys like KONGs, that you can stuff with treats or kibble. This can give your dog something to concentrate on rather than obsessing about you being gone. Again this may not be extremely helpful for a dog with severe separation anxiety.
- A trip to your veterinarian may be necessary. Your vet may be able to provide medication to assist you during your pet's training. Medicating your dog should never be considered as a singular approach to controlling separation anxiety but as a tool to help reduce your pet's stress. Your dog cannot learn if he is constantly freaked-out. There are medications available to lower the level of intensity of arousal and take the edge off enough so learning can take place.

Helping your dog cope with the phobia of being left alone requires time and patience. During the training process you might want to consider taking your dog to a doggie day care facility or having a friend or family member pet sit. If you are able to work out the details this can take a lot of the frustration out of a very difficult situation.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

Please be careful when considering types of confinement for your dog. Dogs that suffer from separation anxiety often do not do well in the usual cage or crate system and could cause injury to themselves. Some trial and error may be necessary to determine what is best suited for your pet and his environment.

Using any type of punishment to control or reduce the problems associated with separation anxiety will likely make the behaviors worse. Fear is the primary force behind these behaviors and punishing your pet will only make him more anxious and frightened.