



SEPARATION ANXIETY

Separation anxiety is one of the most difficult behaviour problems to deal with, as successful modification relies on the owner being present at all times during a very long process. It maybe the most difficult but it is also the most important problem to solve, as it is the most common reason for dogs being rehomed or put into shelters.

Much like humans, dogs have a need to form social attachments. Most of us learn to cope with a person's absence; unfortunately, some dogs just can't cope and become anxious when left alone and exhibit some or all of the classic signs of anxiety, including:

- Excessive vocalisation (barking)
- Whining and crying
- Panting
- Pacing and restlessness
- Drooling
- Vomiting
- Chewing
- Destroying doors and windows
- Eating through walls

Separation anxiety has a number of causes. It is believed that an early history of abandonment and/or genetics can contribute to what can quickly develop into deeply rooted problems which prove difficult to change.

Before a plan is put into place, it is important to establish that it is separation anxiety that your dog is suffering and not a dog trying to relieve boredom when left alone.

If we look at different breeds, their personality traits and the original purpose of their breeding, we can determine the form and amount of exercise they need. Setting up a video camera to watch your dog while you are out will provide a more accurate picture.

Dogs that suffer from separation anxiety can cause major destruction when left alone. It is often at windows and doors or places and objects that belong to the owner, for example the sofa or shoes. Anxious dogs chew these things because chewing releases pleasurable endorphins, bringing about a feeling of calm.

It can be very annoying to arrive home to destruction, but it is important to try and avoid using physical or emotional punishment as these are ineffective and can exacerbate the dog's anxiety issues.

MODIFICATION OF SEPARATION ANXIETY

Firstly we need to remember anxious dogs require appropriate exercise in order to relieve stress. One hour's exercise a day can reduce a dog's anxiety, and is particularly effective if done before your departure. As well as good daily exercise, mental stimulation such as learning new cues centred on impulse control – for example, sit, stay, leaving a treat until told or having to work out how to find the treat – can also prove effective. This helps activate the learning part of the brain which in turn deactivates the emotional centre of the brain responsible for the anxiety.

- It is easier for your dog to cope with your departure if you make less fuss when you leave and return.
- Leaving lights and TV or radio on so it is a similar environment to when you are in.
- Desensitisation to departure triggers, eg. having your keys somewhere different and where you put your coat on. We all have routine that we probably don't realise; dogs are very sensitive to this and can pick up we are about to leave.
- Put coat on and leave but return straight away, no fuss made on exit or return. Keep doing it at different times of the day; this allows your dog to see these triggers in a different way. The length of time you leave can slowly increase if the dog seems comfortable when you return. This is a long process but really helps your dog's anxiety.
- Constant repetition going at a pace your dog is comfortable with is key.
- You could introduce a new toy, eg. a kong filled with tasty safe treats. Introduce the toy while you are there until the dog has a positive emotion around the toy before leaving it with them. They won't be interested in it if they are extremely anxious. Once they are feeling happy with their toy, then it can be helpful to give it to them minutes before you leave to keep them focused on something other than you as you leave. This is probably best to do later in the desensitisation process as they won't be interested when extremely anxious.

Treatment for separation anxiety can be highly effective if carried out diligently. In time, an anxious dog can become a calm, content dog.