Dealing with separation Anxiety

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If you've ever come home to find that your otherwise well-behaved dog has destroyed furniture, had 'accidents' on the carpet or whose howling is disturbing the neighbours while you're away, it's possible that your dog is suffering from a separation related disorder.

Dogs are one of the most social creatures on earth. They just love spending time with you, whether they're playing a game with you or just curling up next to you on the couch. So when it comes time for you to go to work or leave the house for long periods of time, it can make your dog lonely or anxious.

There are a number of things that may contribute to the development of separation related disorders in dogs, such as:

Fear of abandonment. This is especially common with rescued strays and dogs who have been adopted from animal shelters.

A change in your dog's daily routine, perhaps you've gone from not working or working part-time to a full-time job that keeps you away from the house for longer periods of time.

Moving to a new home or other changes in the environment.

Genetics.

The symptoms

Dogs with a separation related disorder show symptoms when they're apart from the caregivers they are strongly bonded to.

The symptoms of a separation related disorder can vary. As soon as your dog realises you're about to leave the house, they may start whining. After you leave, they may start barking or even howling - you may not hear this for yourself, but you may end up hearing about it from your neighbours!

When you do come home, you may find that your dog has chewed your favourite shoes, soiled the floor, scratched at the door or window screen, or even destroyed pieces of furniture. Most of this damage will occur shortly after you leave the house.

You may also find that your dog has become very clingy, following you around the house and never letting you out of their sight. In some extreme cases, dogs will even resort to self-mutilation, chewing excessively on their tail or paws.

If a separation related disorder is suspected, the dog should receive a thorough veterinary examination to rule out any underlying medical problem.

Breaking the pattern

A dog with a separation related disorder needs to learn coping strategies for when they're left alone. Separation anxiety can be treated and managed, and (depending on severity) in some cases cured, but it will generally require lots of patience. A veterinary behaviourist can help tailor strategies to the individual pet and specific situation, which can be very helpful. Generally, training techniques are employed that help replace a pet’s negative associations with positive ones. Anti-anxiety medication is used in some pets, and always in combination with behaviour modification.

Here are a few tips to consider:

Create a safe space

We need to create a safe environment for the dog with a reliable routine. You'll want to avoid any situation where your dog may be triggered to display the problematic behaviours.

- Consider the use of a pet sitter or doggy daycare centre
- Can the dog accompany you to work or school?

The use of a crate as a safe space can be helpful, but it’s important that the pet can come and go as they please. Confining a dog with separation anxiety can lead to more damage. Make sure the crate is appealing and place an item inside that smells like the pet parent,

such as a polar fleece blanket. The pet should not be forced to go to the safe spot, but rather should know they can go there when they need to.

Behaviour modification

Our aim is to give the brain a rest and avoid stimulating the neural pathways that lead to the pet responding to their anxiety. Reassure your dog and help them feel safe while providing coping strategies. Relaxation techniques as well as those that help improve communication between you and your dog are beneficial. Provide enrichment through toys and food puzzles, as well as lots of exercise. We want to help the pet become settled and ultimately more in control of their emotional state so they can think and respond appropriately to their world. A great deal of patience and practice will be required to help the pet slowly develop resilience. This can’t be rushed.

Medication and pheromone therapy

Talk to your vet about medication options that can help your dog feel calmer and more capable of learning. Dog Appeasing Pheromones mimic natural dog pheromones and are frequently used to help dogs feel reassured and reduce the symptoms of stress and anxiety. Correct use of medication should be managed under strict veterinary supervision.

Remember that getting angry at your dog when they show undesirable behaviour is never the solution - in fact, it will create even more anxiety because your dog will associate your absence and return with punishment.

If you're concerned your dog may have a separation related disorder, it's vital to seek the advice and guidance of your vet as a starting point

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