

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Separation anxiety in dogs can be a distressing problem both for owners and their pets. It can also be expensive for the owner and even threaten a pet's health, depending on what form it takes. Affected dogs will often be destructive and/or noisy and/or toilet in the house when left alone. Resolving this pattern of behaviour can be challenging and will usually involve some changes to your routine and your relationship with your pet. There are also medications which can help as part of an overall program.

Behavioural modification techniques.

Leaving:-

1. Try not to have a 'leaving ritual' before you leave the house or go to bed as this will only INCREASE your dog's anxiety. Get things ready well in advance. e.g. close doors, put coat by the door etc and then have a quiet time for 10-30 mins where you are sitting in the same room as your dog, but not engaging with him/her.
2. Make leaving a 'non-event'. Just quietly get up and leave without looking at or speaking to your dog.

Returning:-

DO NOT PUNISH YOUR DOG if your return to a mess. Remember, your dog only makes the mess in the first place because it is anxious. If you repeatedly or even just occasionally punish your dog when you get home, this will only make the anxiety WORSE, making your dog unhappy and slowing progress.

Again, make this as much of a 'non-event' as possible. The big welcome home is a joy for us all, but does not help the dog with separation anxiety.

1) Initially ignore your dog. Don't speak to him/her, don't make eye contact and don't talk. If your dog jumps up at you (as they often do) then just turn to one side so the front feet fall back to the floor rather than pushing the dog away, which will reward with physical contact!

2) Make your way to where you can sit quietly whilst ignoring your dog. Continue to ignore your dog until he/she settles down in their bed. This may take a long time at the start.

3) Once they have been there for a few minutes, reward this good behaviour by (quietly) going over to stroke and praise him/her. If your dog leaps up and becomes excited again then return to your seating position until he/she calms down again and returns to their bed. This could take several attempts before you actually reach your dog in the bed!

Desensitising:-

It is inevitable that as you prepare to leave your dog will pick up on signals that warn of your imminent departure. This can raise your dog's level of anxiety before you

have even left. You can desensitize your dog to this by doing some of the things you do prior to departure, but then remain in the room with your dog. e.g. put your coat on and shut doors as though you were leaving the house or get ready to go to bed but then stay with your dog for a while before doing so.

It is also useful to spend quiet time in the same room as your dog but without interacting with him/her. While it may be tempting to have your pet on your lap or sitting next to you while you are in to 'comfort' him/her, this will actually cause a greater level of anxiety when you leave.

You will have to be very patient initially, but eventually your dog will learn two things. Firstly, and most importantly, your dog will learn that their happiness is not entirely dependent upon your constant presence. Secondly, your dog will learn that when you do leave, you will be returning soon.

Medication

There are a variety of medications available to help dogs which are suffering from anxiety. You can ask your vet if these are appropriate for your pet. These drugs are often very useful in managing anxiety in dogs (and also relieving owner's stress if they quickly stop destructive behaviour!). It is important to remember, however, that these should only be used where appropriate and in conjunction with behavioural modification. Medication is not a substitute for behavioural techniques.

Relieving Boredom

Boredom in dogs is not the same thing as separation anxiety, but can be a contributory factor in destructive or messy behaviour. Many dogs may suffer from both problems at once.

1) Exercise:- Keeping a dog well exercised will obviously help with this, but remember to keep your dog's attention engaged. A dog which only runs around on trips out will just get fitter and need more exercise! Try to make your dog's mind work as well. This can be done using a variety of finding/retrieving/waiting games. Be imaginative to keep your dog on its' toes.

2) Toys:- Remember that many dog toys require the presence of a human to engage in play. This is obviously not going to help the dog with boredom and/or separation anxiety. Chews or toys which can have food put in them are a better option. You may even be able to give your dog's normal meals in a toy such as the 'Buster Cube' or similar.

Training Classes

Don't underestimate these - they can be very helpful to dog and owner!