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Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety describes dogs that become extremely anxious and show distress behaviors when separated from their owners. These behaviors are not limited to: vocalization, destruction, house soiling or inactivity. The goal of treatment is to reduce your pet's level of anxiety by training it to feel comfortable in your absence. This can be a very long process. Initially, during retraining, it will be important to hire a dog sitter or friend to stop in while you are gone. Crates are a great tool but for dogs with severe separation anxiety or those that have barrier frustrations, they can be dangerous because a dog can severely injure himself. Since the underlying problem is anxiety, try to reduce all forms of anxiety prior to departure, at the time of departure and the time of homecoming. Before a lengthy departure, provide a vigorous session of play and exercise. A brief training session can also be productive to counter act the anxiety. Avoid all departure signs so the dog does not become increasingly anxious before you leave, maybe keep him outdoors or in another room as you prepare to go to work and give him something to do; i.e. eat, chew a special bone, outside in the yard. A few minutes prior to departure the dog should be given some fresh toys and objects to distract him to your leaving and do not say good-bye or focus attention on leaving. It is important that your dog is occupied while you depart. Frozen treats or treats stuffed into a toy or Kong keep many dogs occupied and timed feeders that open throughout the day. Your dog must be occupied until you are long gone. Keep a radio or television on so your dog hears voices while you are gone. Leave a blanket or piece of clothing for him that has your smell on it so even though you are not there, he can still smell you.

Keep your pre-departure signals to a minimum. Do not jingle your keys and keep your coat and/or purse in the car. Your dogs will still pick up on cues but you can retrain him and make him associate enjoyable stimulus with these cues. For example, jingle your keys or put your coat on but instead of leaving, just put everything away and settle into a chair. If your dog gets anxious ignore him, once you settle back in your chair, and your dog settles down, praise your dog and repeat the above until he is not getting anxious. For some dogs, this may mean giving him a formal down/stay command.

When you come home, ignore your dog, take him outside and allow him to settle down. Do not make a big fuss over your dog when you are returning, if you do you will be rewarding his barking and anxious behavior. When you return, all should be calm and do not act like it was a big deal for your dog to be left alone.

When you are at home, train your dog to be independent of you. Teach him to stay in his place (bed, pillow) and/or away from you while you are home. When in his place, keep

him there until he is relaxed. This will require his understanding a down/stay command. Do not allow him to follow you from room to room but make him stay while you move about. Do not allow him to sleep in bed with you; he can sleep in your room but on his own bed.

Also, recreate the situation while you are training. Put the television or radio on, place him in a down/stay on his bed, put your coat on, jingle your keys and go into another room. Return immediately and calmly praise and reward him for staying. Slowly increase the time you are away from him from seconds to minutes to ½ an hour. Once your dog is going good, begin leaving the house, again immediately return, then increase the time outside from seconds, to minutes to a ½ an hour.

Many dogs are good when left in the car because they know their owner will return and the times alone are usually very brief. The dogs are usually very relaxed during the car ride and wait patiently for their owners return. If you are able to leave your dog in the car while you are gone for a lengthy period of time, that might be an option to leaving him at home, of course being sure it is not too warm.

Dogs are pack animals so many times it is the alone feeling that makes them anxious and that sometimes is solved by just simply adding another dog, a calm older dog. Once your dog has bonded with this dog, your leaving is not so lonely. If you can't get another dog, maybe borrowing a friend's or relative's dog until your dog is over the separation will help. Again, this dog cannot be anxious or destructive when left in your home.

Anti-anxiety drugs, anti-depressants or a combination of both along with re-training should ease your dog's anxiety. Drugs alone will do little or nothing to improve separation anxiety. It is the retraining program that is needed to help your dog gain independence.

Barrier Frustrations: Some dogs get anxious when crated and will relieve themselves, bark or get excited when left by their owners. In these cases, it may be less stressful to tie the dog with a short, two foot, plastic coated cable tie down. Only use this option if your dog is not a chewer and will not chew the wall. You may have to make one for yourself after purchasing what you need from a hardware store. There should be a leash attachment on one end and another to attach to an eyebolt. Attach the cable-tie down to an eyebolt that has been fastened to a wall. Attach the training collar to the tie-down and when your dog gets excited he will self-correct. *Only use the prong collar after several days or weeks of training so the dog understands the correction, otherwise, tie him on a buckle collar.*

Initially, practice this while you are at home so you are sure your dog is safe and not going to hurt himself. Follow the same instructions as above for leaving the house and returning.