

SEPARATION ANXIETY – What is it and how do I treat it?

Dogs are great companions because they become so attached to people. But that attachment sometimes backfires in the form of “separation anxiety”. What is “separation anxiety”? Simply put, separation anxiety is your dog’s negative response to you leaving him. Most dogs do not become anxious when left alone. They just curl up for a nap and await your return. However some dogs do exhibit adverse behaviors indicating separation anxiety. These range from excessive barking to household destruction to inappropriate elimination. These dogs are not acting out of spite or anger. They are just distressed by separation from “their people”.

Desensitizing Your Dog to Separation

If your dog exhibits signs of separation anxiety you must work to desensitize him to separation. This means changing the sequence of behaviors or cues you give before you actually leave. In preparing to change your cues do the following:

1. Write down exactly what you do when you get ready to leave the house.
2. Observe your dog carefully and identify when in the getting-ready-to-leave sequence he begins to show anxiety.
3. Begin your desensitization program on a weekend so you have at least one to two days to begin reconditioning your dog.
4. ***Do not*** leave your dog alone until he has shown obvious improvement. Take him to work, hire a pet sitter or leave him with a friend. (***Your dog must not be left alone during this desensitizing process.***) ***Which may take a month or more depending on your dog and you.***

Reconditioning the Meaning of Your “Getting-Ready-to-Leave” Cues.

(The reconditioning program is based on changing your dog’s reaction to your cues.)

1. Begin your getting ready to leave sequence.
2. At the point where your behavior begins to cause an anxiety response (ie: panting pacing whining ...) in your dog, break your “leaving” sequence and do something completely out of the ordinary. For example, start to clean the room or fold some clothes or sit down and read a book. Don’t continue to get ready to leave.. You are now breaking the cues.
3. When the dog is calm (maybe 5 – 10 minutes) begin the getting ready to leave sequence again. Stop the sequence when the anxiety behavior starts. Do a different sequence of behavior (activity) until the dog is calm. You can even go play good game of fetch. He’ll be really surprised..
4. Repeat steps 1, 2 and 3 until you can get through the entire sequence right to the door.
5. Once your getting ready to go out the door just put your hand on the door knob and then go sit down or what ever except leave.. When you come back in be calm and aloof. Don’t give any effusive greeting or make a fuss. Just go about your normal house activity.

6. When you can go out and return quickly with no adverse behavior from your dog, lengthen your time outside. Starting with seconds and working up to minutes and so on *..Remember to bounce around with your times..from shorter to longer to shorter again..* Get in the car and drive out of the driveway, then return. When you come back inside, don't acknowledge your dog until you do some small chore. Then speak to him quietly. Be calm and aloof, don't make a fuss.
7. Next try your entire getting-ready-to-leave sequence and go out **with** your dog. Take him with you to work or a friend's or on an errand.
8. Each morning repeat this sequence until your dog isn't stressed by your getting-ready-to-leave behaviors.
9. Now it's time to lengthen the amount of time you leave the house. First 2 minutes, then 5 minutes, then 1 minute, then 10 minutes, etc. Vary the times you are gone from shorter to longer to shorter again. Soon you will be able to leave for longer and longer periods.

Helpful Hints

- Don't expect too much too fast from your dog. Changing his behavior will take time and patience. You may have to spend some vacation time on this process.**Remember this didn't happen over night..**
- Give the dog a special, long lasting treat to distract him from your absence. A marrow bone filled with peanut butter or yogurt tastes great and will keep him busy for hours.
- Be sure your dog gets plenty of exercise when you are home.
- Try to change all your patterns with your dog. Play ball or go for walks at different times and in different sequences.
- If you see anxiety developing in your dog, defuse it by changing the behavior pattern you are in. Avoid patterns of your behavior that may reward your dog's anxiety.
- Teach and practice the "stay" exercise. When he is up to a 10 minute stay, go out of sight for a few seconds. Gradually increase the amount of time to 10 minutes. Reward your dog for being away from you and not following you around..If he stays lying down while your someplace elce toss him a treat..*(don't call him to you)*

Remember, your dog wants to please you. But he must understand what you want and what is and is not acceptable. Your patience, consistency and love will help him modify his behavior so as to fit appropriately into the routine of your household.