

Separation Anxiety, or Something Else?

Susan Sarubin, Certified Professional Canine Behavior Consultant and Trainer

You leave your dog home alone for a few hours and return to find the stuffing from your sofa strewn all over the living room. Or perhaps there's a "deposit" on the kitchen floor for the third time this week. Maybe the next-door neighbor calls again to complain about the barking when you are not at home. While destructive behavior, inappropriate elimination, and excessive vocalization are common canine problem behaviors associated with separation anxiety, these concerning behaviors also may occur for reasons other than anxiety. Destructive behavior may be due to normal exploratory behavior or boredom of an under-exercised, under-stimulated dog lacking in enrichment. Elimination mishaps may be the result of incomplete housetraining or a medical issue. And barking may also be associated with boredom, excessive energy, or in response to outside noises. These problem behaviors, while a source of frustration for you as an owner, are usually resolved by providing the dog with additional housetraining, medical treatment if needed, increased physical exercise and mental stimulation, etc. But if you've checked all the boxes on meeting your dogs needs in regard to these behaviors and nothing is helping, your dog may be suffering (yes, suffering) from either separation anxiety, or more commonly, isolation distress.

Separation anxiety is a clinically diagnosed condition, although many canine behavior professionals, as well as the general public, use the term separation anxiety to cover behaviors that indicate anxiety when left alone. The actual clinical condition of separation anxiety is characterized by the dog not tolerating being separated from his *specific* person or people, regardless of the presence of other people. The more common presentation is isolation distress; the dog experiences stress when left alone but not when in the presence of a person...any person will do. In addition to the common behavior problems already mentioned, both separation anxiety (SA) and isolation distress (ID) may include clingy behavior, whining, howling, panting, sweaty paws, digging, drooling, pacing, self-mutilation, trembling, anorexia, destruction commonly around escape routes (windows and doors), and excessive greeting behavior when you arrive home. These behaviors do not occur because your dog is simply bored, or "mad" at you and being spiteful or rebellious, but due to fear and anxiety; when left alone, your dog is having the canine equivalent of a panic attack in a human.

If you suspect your dog suffers from SA (or ID), you are not alone...it is a common condition in dogs, and often seen in dogs who have experienced trauma : car accidents, death of another animal they are bonded to, and, yes, even dogs who are surrendered to shelters and rescues...some relinquished because of it, others developing SA due to the trauma of losing their home and family or from a prolonged stay in a stressful shelter environment. In addition, recent research indicates that there is likely a genetic component to separation anxiety. In the last two years, behavior professionals have seen a noticeable increase in SA, especially in "pandemic puppies." With owners working from home these puppies never learn that it is safe to be left alone, and all hell breaks loose when the owner returns to the office.

To help determine if your dog is actually suffering from SA, collect 5-10 minutes of video of your dog's behavior after you *leave* your home. You likely have a cellphone or tablet that can

record videos...you can even schedule a Zoom session (or connect via Facetime) with your tablet set up to video your dog while you watch in real time on your cellphone. Don't leave any chewies or food-stuffed toys that may distract and occupy your dog, delaying any behaviors of concern. If your dog's behaviors are consistent with those associated with SA, don't despair...while there is no "quick fix", there is hope, and help!

In the short term, you need a way to manage your dog's behavior so that he doesn't suffer, and your home is not damaged. Is it possible for you to leave your dog with someone, such as a friend or family member, when you are not home? Doggie day care or boarding during the day may also be options. Perhaps your workplace allows you to bring your dog to work. Crating a dog with separation anxiety when left alone may make the problem worse. And confining to a room where he can do minimal damage may limit damage to your house, but not to your dog's emotional well-being. Speak with your veterinarian about giving your dog medication to decrease anxiety. Medication can be extremely helpful when used as part of a SA training protocol, keeping in mind that medication is not a long-term solution for separation anxiety and intended to be used in conjunction with behavior modification.

In the long term, treating separation anxiety in dogs is a challenging, labor-intensive process that necessitates a strong commitment from the owner and, in many cases, help from a qualified behavior professional (a veterinary behaviorist, Certified Applied Behaviorist, or a CSAT, Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer) in order to resolve the issue. The goal of treatment is to be able to leave your dog alone without feeling anxious. This is accomplished through training procedures designed to change your dog's emotional opinion of, and associations with, your departures so that your dog feels safe when left alone. This includes very gradually increasing duration of your absence only when your dog is without anxiety for a shorter duration. SA responds well to these procedures, so if you are committed to helping your dog overcome his fear of being left alone, you have good reason to be optimistic.

Resource:

Canine separation anxiety information: www.malenademartini.com

Connect with a Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer (CSAT) for one-on-one training.

Online, self-paced course also available (Mission Possible: Separation Anxiety Training for Guardians)

Book recommendations:

Don't Leave Me! Step-by-Step Help for Your Dog's Separation Anxiety by Nicole Wilde

I'll Be Home Soon! How to Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety by Patricia B. McConnell