

SEPARATION ANXIETY? TRY THIS 4-STEP PROGRAM

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A recent study suggests that dogs suffering from separation anxiety are the pessimists of the canine world who always expect the worst in any situation. In the case of separation anxiety, their worst fear is presumably that their owners have gone, never to return. Pessimists or not, these dogs tend to be more sensitive and anxious than their psychologically stable counterparts.

Further evidence of these dogs' anxious nature is provided by their clinginess, neediness and lack of independence. Also, they frequently exhibit other behaviors in the fear spectrum, such as noise phobia or storm phobia. Opinions vary on how dogs acquire this problem, but nature and nurture must be involved. Of these two factors, I believe nurture has the most profound impact.

Nature vs. Nurture

Certain breeds, even certain breed groups, seem more inclined to develop excessive fearfulness. A genetically nervous strain of pointers and the predisposition of herding breeds to thunderstorm phobia attest to this influence. However, the importance of environmental factors, particularly in early life during the sensitive period of development (three to 12 weeks) and perhaps slightly beyond, almost certainly plays a key role.

That most dogs with separation anxiety are mixed breeds, have a less-than-ideal upbringing, often have multiple owners and a history of adoption from a shelter all support this contention. My contention is that if a pup is taken away from its mother for an extended period and is unattended and forced to experience the desolation of perceived desertion, it will subsequently:

- Always attempt to avoid separation from attachment figures.
- Panic, try to escape or display displacement behaviors—all signs of anxiety—when left alone.

To this end, an affected pup will "shadow" its owner, become anxious as the owner prepares to leave and pace, vocalize or destroy property when he finds himself alone.

Some of these dogs display what I call the "Houdini syndrome" as they somehow manage to break out of crates, scale high fences, squeeze through narrow openings or break through screened (in one case, glass) windows to

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escape. Many injure themselves in the process, the classic injuries being broken teeth and worn or broken, bleeding nails.

About 30 percent of dogs with separation anxiety become so anxious and panicky that they eliminate urine or feces in sheer terror. Many pace mindlessly while others displace into self-licking or chewing cushions, furniture or other items in the home. Others salivate or vomit. Salivation results from stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, with consequent production of thick, viscid saliva. I find this sign a particularly ominous prognostic indicator.

In addition, dogs with true separation anxiety often exhibit psychogenic anorexia—they're too nervous to eat—and display exuberant greeting behavior when their owners finally return home. Not all classic signs of separation anxiety are present in all dogs, but hyper attachment, prolonged vocalization, destructive behavior and exuberant greeting manifest in most affected dogs.

Possible Causes

From questioning owners, I know that a week or so of separation from an attachment figure, whether the pup's mom or a new owner, can precipitate this syndrome. In that respect, separation anxiety bears some similarities to post traumatic stress disorder, in which a single extremely stressful experience will cause a lifetime of avoidance of that experience plus ongoing feelings of hyper arousal, a low startle threshold, and appearing tense or on edge.

Although some believe that separation anxiety treatment is a slam dunk, it's not. Studies, including a recent one, purport to show that dogs with separation anxiety can be easily cured using a planned departure desensitization program.

I believe such studies are flawed in terms of their method assessment of treatment success and some are subject to euphemistic interpretation of what is "soft" data. Dogs with separation anxiety are temperamentally scarred, and their underlying sensitive natures and susceptibility to separation angst does not change. The best response we can hope to achieve using all resources available is to improve the situation to a livable degree—as with other fear-based behavior problems.

Sometimes, but not always, the treatment result can be good to the point of a perceived "fix," but even good responders remain temperamentally brittle and susceptible to back sliding. Also note that supposedly successful desensitization programs are notoriously difficult for owners to implement, requiring more time, understanding and commitment than is reasonable to expect.

The program I use is not a planned departure technique but leans heavily on counter conditioning.

The treatment is meted out in four phases:

- What owners need to do as they prepare to leave.
- How they should set up the environment while away.
- How they greet the dog on their return.
- How they interact with the dog while they are with it.

Leaving the Dog

On leaving, I suggest feeding half the dog's rations at the precise time of departure, making sure the departure is a happy event but engaging a modification of dog trainer Bill Campbell's jolly routine. In addition, I have owners supply numerous ancillary treats such as peanut butter or spray cheese-stuffed Kongs and other stuffable toys filled with treats.

I have owners put down chew toys enhanced with favorite canine aromas, such as vanilla, anise or certain hunting lures. Regarding the food that is left down, I realize that I just said that dogs with separation anxiety often experience psychogenic anorexia. It may well be that the first day the owner tries my feeding strategy none of the food is touched. Fear not!

On the owner's return, the first thing he or she should do is to pick up all food items, including the morning meal. The dog is then fed the other half of its daily ration that evening. Because it is now effectively on half rations, the dog will be hungrier the next day and more inclined to eat when the owner departs.

This process of picking up uneaten food may have to continue several days before the dog's appetite is piqued enough for the dog's desire for food to overcome its anxiety.

Enriching Environment

The second part of this program is enriching the environment while the owner is away. In addition to providing food and various treats and toys, we get dogs out of crates and into dog-proofed areas that are more comfortable and have a view of the outside world. Bird feeders and squirrel feeders outside provide additional entertainment for the dog.

In addition, the TV can be left on to provide visual stimulation while classical music, preferably more melodic-sounding like Bach or Beethoven, can be played to replace the sound of silence. A CD series of bioacoustically engineered music titled "Through a Dog's Ear" may be just the ticket. You can find it on-line.

Greeting Upon Return

On the owner's return, in addition to picking up all toys and treats, he or she should pay the dog little or no attention until it has settled down. Then and only then is it time to acknowledge the dog's presence through attention, including petting and praise.

Of course, the only time you can train a dog is when you are with it and, in this respect, we advise owners to put some physical and psychological distance between themselves and their dog for at least 30 minutes a day. Owners are advised to select periods when the dog is not permitted to follow them around from place to place but instead required to be some distance from them while being given something entertaining to do.

To enforce this separation, or "distancing," sometimes it is necessary to employ physical restraint in the form of a crate or tether. Another thing I ask of

owners is to have their dogs sleep on a dog bed on the floor rather than on the owner's bed. Over time, the dog bed is moved farther from the bed until it is as far away as possible, though in the same room.

When all four components of this program are in effect, for speedier and sometimes better results, we sometimes prescribe mood-stabilizing medications. Two FDA-approved treatments are clomipramine and fluoxetine (Prozac for humans). Both treatments are designed to increase brain serotonin and thus stabilize mood.

In some cases the addition of short-acting medications as supplements to these background therapies is helpful to augment and expedite treatment results. My two favorite supplements are the Valium-type drug alprazolam (Xanax) or the human blood pressure (and anxiety) treatment clonidine (Catapres).

The treatment's goal is to produce dogs that can be left alone and not experience so much anxiety and not exhibit troublesome unwanted behaviors. More serious cases of separation anxiety involving, say, co-morbid thunderstorm phobia, are particularly difficult to treat.

Some of these supersensitive dogs are Chicken Littles of the canine world who, pessimistically it seems, always appear to think the sky is falling. To make shrinking violets less anxious and have them act out less intensely is doable, but to cure them of their sensitivity is next to impossible.