

SEPARATION ANXIETY

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I'd like to preface this by stating that this information is based on what I've read in various books and what I've learned personally in working with a few dogs here in Tulsa. I'm not a licensed behaviorist...just trying to learn as much as possible like everyone else!

Here are the classic signs of separation anxiety:

- * Dog is VERY attached to its owners and follows them everywhere through the house when they are home.
- * Dog is destructive when the owner is not home. Doorways and windows (exits and entries) are often targets, such as molding, doors, blinds, window sills, etc. This is known as "barrier frustration."
- * Dog will sleep with owner if allowed and usually is pretty clingy...wants to be with owner on couch or lays on floor touching owner.
- * Dog will act sad or nervous before person leaves and typically starts whining or barking after owner leaves.
- * Dog greets owner's return with GREAT exuberance that can go on for several minutes.

Often times dogs with this problem are from shelters, pet stores or are pups who were weaned too early, but not always. The most recent case I heard was a dog that was from a responsibly bred/raised litter. The problem came up because the couple lived in an apartment in France and when they would try to leave the young pup, it would cry.

Fearing they would disturb their neighbors, they opted to take the pup with them everywhere (which is easy to do in France), including restaurants. This was her life for the first six months. Then they moved to the US and she couldn't go everywhere with them any more. Boom...BIG problems. She fights to get out of the crate. She cries, she is destructive, etc. They built a run for her in their garage thinking it would help, but when they watch through the window, she paces nonstop and tries to shove her nose through the wire. Upon talking a little more, I discovered that they console her a lot. They try to reassure her before they leave...which may seem right, but is actually the opposite of what should be done. These dogs have to be reprogrammed to NOT focus on their owners' departure. So...treatment.

Well, some of the solutions are often the tough part for owners:

- * Make sure the dog gets plenty of aerobic exercise every day.
 - * Put the dog on a lower protein diet.
- * Do obedience training to reinforce your leadership position.
- * Start "independence training." This teaches the dog that it can indeed survive without its owners always around. For example, the dog should not be allowed to sleep on the bed with its owners, but rather should have a dog bed or crate in the bedroom. The dog should be discouraged from following the owner around the house all the time. Give it a

command to go to its bed or give it something to do so it learns it does not have to be with you every moment. Dog should also not be given attention every time it solicits it.

* The owner should do his/her "leaving the house" rituals often while home so the dog learns that these cues don't always indicate the owner's departure. Pick up your keys, put on a jacket, then go sit on the couch. Do this sort of exercise several times a day for a while. Even touch the door, walk around a bit, pick up purse or briefcase, etc. The dog will get worried at first, but will eventually calm down. The dog should not be reassured or corrected during these exercises.

* Don't make a fuss about leaving or returning. In fact, it is recommended that owners totally ignore the dog for 20 minutes before leaving and after coming home. This is a tough one, but it helps smooth out the emotional peaks and valleys.

* If the dog will show interest in a treat stuffed toy (hollow bone or Kong stuffed with something yummy), give it to the dog 20 minutes before leaving the house and then try to leave without the dog really realizing it. These long-lasting treats should only be offered when you are leaving to counter condition the dog...or make the dog possibly look forward to your departure because the REALLY great toy comes out.

* Consider making a tape of an evening at home...normal conversation and household noises and then leave it playing for the dog when you leave. You might even toss in a few easy commands and praise such as "Spot, down...good dog!" This could provide comfort for the dog.

For a dog with full blown separation anxiety, you really need to do all of the above. I read that extreme cases often respond well to behavior modification combined with medication to ease fear and anxiety such as an antidepressant called amitriptyline. Usually, you can start out with that if necessary, and then wean off as the dog improves. This is obviously something to discuss with a vet if necessary and I'd sure try the behavior modification first.

Again...this is all drawn from what I've read from a few books, but they all seem to agree and I have seen some marked improvement with a couple of dogs here. It's a rough problem...hope this helps.

Nancy Werhane Jenks OK

**The following is in relation to the Dalmatian Breed,
and may be true of your breeds too.**

<< The only phrase that I think I would add to is the one above re. Following you around. In my experience (admittedly limited to 25 years of Dalmatians), they DO follow you around everywhere if you allow it. I don't mind but that doesn't always signify that they have other separation anxiety symptoms. Dalmatians naturally want to know what is

going on.

Very good point, Janet (and of course I don't mind you writing!). If following you around were the ONLY symptom indicating separation anxiety, then I would be the proud owner of seven VERY messed up dogs! ;-)

I think the "following" you see with separation anxiety is different from standard Dalmatian nosiness (is that a word? ;-). It's more of an obsession/clinginess. I've seen it in action with a couple of dogs and it is a nervous "don't leave me" kind of attachment. When my Dals follow me, it's very relaxed and happy. Plus, you wouldn't really worry about the following unless you were having the other problems, so I think it still applies regardless of the breed. Heck, my non-Dals follow me around too! It's a parade around here no matter where I go!

<< There is also the side that some owners for whatever reason, leave Dalmatians alone for too long and naturally they get anxious and hyped up because they are the one breed if you could limit it to one breed, which should NOT be left alone for hours every day. They may display these symptoms as a result of frustration and boredom and ignoring them when you come home might exacerbate the reaction :)) >>

Actually, I might have to agree and disagree with you here. Though boredom and too much time alone are not the same as separation anxiety, some of the "fixes" would certainly work. Increased exercise, lower protein (which most Dals are on anyway), special, long-lasting goodies that only come out when the owner has to be away, a tape left playing of normal house sounds, confinement to a safe area etc. I also don't think it's wrong to not fuel the "you're home! you're home!" frenzy. Perhaps in this case, the 20 minutes of ignoring before and after are extreme, but I know I sure don't make a big deal when I come home. We just head outside and the dogs romp around and settle down before we really interact too much. Of course with 12 dogs...I could be seriously injured if I allowed immediate rambunctious greetings! Nancy the pancake! The points Janet brought up are great and really illustrate the importance of understanding the type of problem with which you are dealing. Anytime a dog "problem" arises, you need to really investigate the cause and learn to think like your dog. That's what I really preach to classes and seminars. Stop expecting the dog to view the world through your eyes, think like your dog. Once you master this, a lot of things become so much clearer. Case in point is consoling a nervous or anxious dog after a loud noise startles it or maybe when you are getting ready to leave the house. Are you telling the dog that everything is OK...or are you reinforcing the nervous behavior. Nine times out of 10, the latter is true. OK...that was long again! Sorry...I'm a writer by trade (though you probably can't tell by the way I butcher spelling and grammar on e-mails!) and tend to get carried away! I'm also pretty passionate about behavior issues because so many dogs are surrendered or destroyed because of a lack of understanding of these problems. Regarding permission to reprint this, please feel free to share/use the information, but also know that what I sent out is truly a collection of knowledge gained from reading the work of others. I cannot take credit for the methods presented...I didn't invent them, I just took the time to study them, so please present it that way.

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