

Educating Pet Owners: Separation Anxiety or Boredom?

At the end of a work day many owners may well return to a household of destruction and chaos, a first assumption may be that their dog suffers from acute separation anxiety. Sometimes this may be the case, but in many instances, the dog has destroyed the house as a cure for another very common problem in the canine world: acute boredom.

There are behavioural signs that can tell us if the dog is suffering from separation anxiety or is simply trying to cope with feeling bored and unstimulated. While the end result can look similar, thankfully many cases of supposed separation anxiety are actually easy-to-rectify cases of a bored dog finding ways to fill his/her day.

Before a treatment plan can be put together, it is important to make sure the dog is indeed suffering from anxiety rather than just being a bored dog trying to entertain his or herself during the owners absence. Setting up a video camera and recording the dog's actions while alone will provide more insight into the cause of the behaviour.

Strategically placed cameras should be focused on areas where the destruction is worst or by the door that is used most regularly to come and go. If the barking, whining and destruction is very severe particularly within the first 20-30 minutes of departure, that is a good indicator that the dog may be suffering some distress on separation. If, however the dog settles after departure and then wakes up and barks or chews throughout the day, the behaviour is more likely to be due to boredom.

Once it is determined the cause of the behaviour and established that the dog is simply bored, keeping them enriched with activities, games, and exercise can combat these boredom related behaviours.

Dogs who do suffer from separation anxiety can display anything from minor to major destruction when left alone. Such destruction is normally focused on points of entry such as doors and windows, or places and objects that are more intimately associated with an owner such as shoes, the bed or the couch.

Anxious dogs often chew things because chewing releases pleasurable endorphins into the body, promoting a feeling of calm – just as some humans release tension by biting their nails. A treat stuffed KONG creates a challenge that can typically last 20 minutes engaging dogs during periods when anxiety is most likely to be at its peak.

How to start modifying a dog's Separation Anxiety?

- First and foremost, anxious dogs require appropriate exercise, it is a potent stress reliever being particularly effective if done just before departure.
- Avoid making a fuss of the dog during departures and returns.
- Dogs are also sensitive to changes in their environment and the transition from the energy when the owner is present to silence in the home when they leave is profound. Leaving lights on and utilising tools like playing specially-designed calming music for dogs during the absence can help make the transition easier.
- Desensitisation to departure triggers is important, as dogs can become anxious as soon as they see the keys being picked up or their owner putting on a coat.
- Masking these triggers by hiding the keys in a different place, using a different bag or not wearing a coat can help, but the dog may become wise to this as departure energy is difficult to hide.
- Putting on a coat and exiting followed immediately by a return, allows a dog to see the trigger in a different light – the coat doesn't always mean that the owner is going to leave for a long period of time.
- Constant repetition over a number of days may help desensitise the dog until departures no longer trigger a response.
- Time spent away can be gradually increased until the dog is confident that the owner will always return.



Should I Leave My Dog with Appropriate Activity Toys?

- If the Separation Anxiety is severe the dog might be too anxious to eat or play with a toy during the owner's absence so it is important to introduce the toys and/or chews while present, building up a positive emotion around that particular toy.
- In keeping with safety, it is important to initially supervise a dog with a food stuffed KONG to ensure that the correct size toy and strength of rubber grade has been selected to suit the individual's chewing temperament. KONG recommends frequent inspection of toys for wear and tear. Toys showing signs of wear i.e. holes or pieces tearing off should be discarded and replaced. Choosing the right sized KONG to meet a dog's chewing needs is very important.
- Once positive feeling around toys have been established the dog can be given them a few minutes before the owner departs which will allow the dog to focus on the toy rather than the owner leaving.
- Interactive toys such as rubber toys stuffed with treats and puzzle feeders can help re-focus the mind, causing the dog to release anxious energy on appropriate items.

Treatment for separation anxiety can be highly effective if implemented diligently, a once destructive and anxious dog can become a much more relaxed and contented animal. In most cases, true separation anxiety cases require the guidance of qualified trainers and veterinarians to help the behaviour modification process.

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