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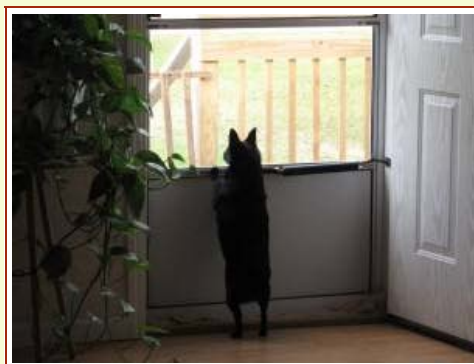
Dog Separation Anxiety and How to Deal with It

Separation Anxiety VS. Looking For Something To Do

Separation anxiety (S.A.) symptoms often resemble boredom behaviors, including chewing, dissecting, digging (if dogs are left outside), "accidents" in the house, and excessive vocalization. A close look at your lifestyle will determine if yours is a case of dog anxiety or dog boredom.

Some Dogs Struggle With Modern Lifestyles

According to Raymond and Lorna Coppinger, dogs evolved because humans have inadvertently or intentionally selected for "low flight distance" for millennia - those dogs that were most comfortable in close proximity to humans and their settlements were most likely to receive food from humans. Closeness to humans conferred a reproductive advantage for dogs through increased access to resources.



Traditionally, this arrangement worked well for dogs. Then and in many rural areas today, leashes or fences were few or non-existent. Dogs could roam off-leash, greeting other dogs, chasing squirrels, rabbits, deer, woodchucks, cats, and the occasional skunk or porcupine. Crashing happily through woods, fields, and streams, dogs exercised their bodies and all their senses. Many worked closely with their owners all day hunting, herding, carting, or guarding. These dogs would then return home exhausted, crash on the floor to happily receive belly rubs, and sleep until morning. Very few dogs living this type of lifestyle suffer from separation anxiety.

Automobile traffic makes this type of lifestyle dangerous for dogs now, and busy modern lifestyles and long working days make similar stimulations impractical and out of reach for most dog owners. This is a conflict of interests - what is in the best interest of the dog (plentiful mental and physical stimulation) conflicts with the owner's desire to relax after a long day.

Ask Not What Your Dog Can Do For You, But What You Are Doing For Your Dog

How much exercise does your dog get? How much daily training? How often do you play with her? How long are you separated each day? How often does she socialize with other dogs appropriately?

Many dogs have deficits in socialization (with humans and dogs), mental stimulation (training, toys, play), and/or physical stimulation (running, swimming, walking, hiking, playing). Make sure to provide your dog with an opportunity to engage in all three daily. If dogs are not provided with this stimulation, boredom digging, chewing, barking, will likely ensue. Fulfilling basic needs remedies behavior problems related to boredom.

Puppy Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety can take root in puppyhood - now is the time for prevention. It is always better to prevent than untrain; so provide your puppy with "stuff to do" in your absence (stuffed Kongs, a visit from a puppy walker to play/walk), and always remember to make entries and exits to the home very low key (these are good tips for adult dogs as well!). Practice separation as a behavior, starting with a small duration and gradually building as your dog is successful.

If you must say goodbye to your dog, do it well before you plan on leaving (at least a half hour in advance) and get it out of the way - remember that this is for your benefit - not your dog's; dramatic goodbyes will only teach her that separation is cause for stress. Wait for calm behavior before greeting your dog upon your return home, and keep the greetings quiet, relaxed.

Identifying Separation Anxiety In Dogs

If your dog's basic needs are being met and you still suspect separation anxiety, look for the following symptoms: extreme destruction of property or self (tearing walls apart, bloodying paws trying to escape from a crate, breaking or cracking of teeth trying to escape the house or enter if left outside, anorexia/inability to drink fluids when left alone, inability to be separated from you (even briefly, in another room) while you're at home, and anxiety behavior related to one specific individual in the household (dog is not relieved by the presence of other household members in the absence of the attachment figure). If you note these symptoms in your dog, consult with a behavioral professional for guidance.

Dog Separation Anxiety Solutions

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Dog separation anxiety treatment should include desensitization and counter-conditioning to the attachment figure's absence as well as the environmental cues which predict her absence (grabbing keys, putting coat/shoes on, sunglasses, starting the car, etc.). For extreme cases, it is best to bring a veterinary behaviorist into the rehabilitation team, as some S.A. dogs can benefit from conventional or alternative medical treatments. For dogs with hormonal or neurochemical imbalances, desensitization and counter-conditioning may need to be accompanied by medication or supplementation. For these dogs, neither medical nor behavioral treatment will be successful without the other.

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