



Paw Prints

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Columnist

Separation anxiety in dogs

You had a change in routine with a new job, and your furry friend isn't handling it well. When Rover hears you pick up your keys to go, he starts whining, gets restless and runs to the door hoping he can go too. Then when you return home later, he's wild with joy and follows you around. But you also find a couple of your slippers chewed up in little pieces, and you also notice scratch marks on the front door. Rover had been scratching and digging to get out for the few hours that you've been gone.

One of the most common complaints of pet parents is that their dog is disruptive or destructive when left alone. Their pooch might urinate, defecate (even though he is house trained), bark, howl, chew, dig or try to escape. These can all be symptoms of distress.

You may be dealing with a case of separation anxiety.

The term gets tossed around and talked about casually, but separation anxiety is a serious matter. True separation anxiety is your dog's panicked response to being left alone.

Separation anxiety is triggered when dogs become upset because of separation from their human companions. And each dog handles it differently. Some dogs suffering from separation anxiety become agitated when their pet parent leaves. Others seem anxious or depressed.

Separation anxiety ranges anywhere from mild to extreme. An example of extreme separation anxiety could be a dog that will attempt to dig and chew through doors or windows, which could result in self-injury, such as broken teeth, cut and scraped front paws and damaged nails.

Separation anxiety can occur in animals from multiple or single-pet homes. It may be more likely to occur in animals with a history of abuse. Or dogs that have had a traumatic separation from a previous owner, such as a dog brought into a shelter may have an increased risk. Dogs that have missed out on normal social interaction with people or other animals, especially as puppies, may also be at risk.

A dog that has never had a prior problem may develop separation anxiety when

there is a change in the routine, such as when a pet parent's work schedule is altered or when the family moves into a new home. Some dogs may just develop the disorder as they grow older, and some breeds seem to be genetically susceptible.

Remember — your furry friend's behavior is a part of a panic response. Your dog isn't trying to punish you! He just wants you to come home. Scolding or punishing Rover may only lead to confusion, more anxiety, and worse behavior.

If you feel your dog has separation anxiety, the first step is to discuss the situation with your veterinarian immediately. It's important to make sure that Rover's behavior is really due to separation anxiety and not a medical issue.

Separation anxiety is preventable if you're starting with a puppy. Unfortunately, sometimes separation anxiety just isn't preventable, especially with an older dog. But thanks to desensitization, crating techniques, and an understanding of the disorder, it's treatable.

Here are some effective techniques to help your furry friend with mild separation anxiety:

Some behaviorists suggest independence training in various forms — for instance, having your dog practice staying at a distance. Practice having your dog stay while you leave the room and come back. This

training will help Rover learn that he can remain calm and happy in one place while you go to another room.

Take Rover for a brisk walk right before you leave the house. This might help him relax and rest while you're gone.

Counterconditioning might also reduce or resolve a mild case of separation anxiety. According to the ASPCA, counterconditioning is a treatment process that changes an animal's fearful, anxious or aggressive reaction to a pleasant, relaxed one instead.

It's done by associating the presence of a feared or disliked situation with something really good, something your dog loves. In other words, counterconditioning focuses on developing an association between being alone and good things or rewards, like delicious food. Your dog can learn that what he fears actually predicts good things for him.

Leave a food toy like a Kong stuffed with peanut butter or cottage cheese ready for him to dig into as soon as you leave. A Kong can be frozen so it takes more of Rover's time to focus on the delicious treat. This also eliminates boredom. Be sure to remove the special food toys as soon as you return home so that Rover only has access to them when you are gone. He might end up looking forward to you leaving after he's used to the routine.

Another technique is crate



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Mia has separation anxiety and does well with counterconditioning.

training. It can be helpful for some dogs. If they learn that the crate is their safe place to go when left alone. However, for other dogs, the crate can cause added stress and anxiety.

Separation anxiety has little to do with training or discipline; your dog's behaviors are a result of the severe panic your dog feels when you're not there. Left untreated, it causes damage to your house and belongings — and serious psychological suffering for your dog. Let your veterinarian know about your furry friend's behaviors. If you need more assistance resolving your furry friend's anxiety issues, consult a professional animal-behavior specialist.

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