

MONTGOMERY COUNTY ANIMAL SHELTER

PET BEHAVIOR AND TRAINING SERVICES, INC.

SEPARATION ANXIETY IN DOGS

Written by Pet Behavior and Training Services, Inc. for use by the Montgomery County Animal Shelter

Common characteristics of separation anxiety while the owner is gone from the house:

- 1) barking, whining and howling
- 2) destructive behavior
- 3) inappropriate elimination
- 4) drooling

While the owner is home:

- 1) following the owner around the house
- 2) frequently leaning against the owner
- 3) overly exuberant greeting behaviors
- 4) becomes distressed with owner's preparation to leave

Separation anxiety in dogs is very much like a panic disorder in humans. For dogs who have a great deal of anxiety about being left home, simply confining or crating them seldom works. Closed in a room or crate they may try to dig or chew their way out breaking teeth, bloodying paws, tearing up carpet and chewing holes in walls.

Anxiety behaviors are not the result of a dog that is mad at you and trying to get even. They are not the result of a dog who is disobedient, They are distress responses.

Separation anxiety can be resolved using counter conditioning and desensitization techniques. The techniques used are similar to the techniques used on humans who are excessively fearful of flying in airplanes or afraid of snakes.

Separation Anxiety Management Tips

The following tips may help you until you can get help from a professional who is familiar with behavior modification techniques for separation anxiety.

- ⇒ Try to find a friend who is home during the day to stay with your dog. You may be able to find a doggie day care. (be sure to check it out first!)
- ⇒ Never punish a dog with separation anxiety, it is counter productive. The only thing punishment will teach the dog is that signs of destructive behavior will get him yelled

at and this provides him with yet another stress. Not only does he have to worry about his owner being gone, he has to worry about what happens when his owner gets home.

- ⇒ Try leaving the dog with a “kong” or a sterilized bone stuffed with a bit of cheese or peanut butter. It may help take his mind off of being alone.
- ⇒ Exercise your dog for 10 to 15 minutes before you leave. A hard game of fetch would be ideal. End the play 20 minutes or so before you have to leave to give the dog time to settle down and relax. Be sure to provide other periods of time throughout the day for exercise. Almost any problem behavior can be improved by providing the dog with more exercise.
- ⇒ Be careful when leaving and returning home not to sound panicked about what might happen when you leave or what has happened while you were gone. Keep your hello’s and good-bye’s low-keyed—“ I’ve got to go to work now. You watch the house.” “Hi, I’m back. Do you want to go outside?”
- ⇒ Dogs need to have something special to look forward to each day. They need to feel special and receive your undivided attention. As a way of providing this reassurance for your pet, you should set aside a few minutes each day for “Special Time”. It need not be long, 10 minutes will do nicely, but it must be very special and MUST occur at the same time each day. Usually, late in the evening is a good time since things are generally more relaxed at this time. Use special treats, play fun games and practice quiet petting and simple obedience. Whatever you do, make it the greatest time in your dog’s day. The more reliable the sessions, the less frustration he will experience at times when you must leave or attend to other things.

If you need help dealing with your dog’s separation anxiety problem you may call us for an appointment at 937-293-5686. If you live outside the area ask your veterinarian for a referral to a pet behavior specialist.

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A non-profit organization specializing in the behavior of pets

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