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Separation Anxiety

Separation Anxiety in dogs is a syndrome of behaviors related to a dogs' being separated from family members or a primary caregiver. In its true form it is very distressing to both the dog and the dog's human caregivers. Telltale signs of separation anxiety are vocalization, elimination (often urination *and* defecation), destructiveness at points of exit, anorexia or depression, vomiting, drooling or excessive licking. These behaviors are usually exclusive to the human caregiver's departure and absence. In other words, the dog usually doesn't do any of the above when accompanied by the caregiver. In fact, many dogs with separation anxiety are described as "ideal dogs" except when they are left alone. Other signs of separation anxiety are signs of distress in the dog prior to the caregiver's departure and over exaggerated greeting of the caregiver upon his or her return.

It's important to note that separation anxiety is a *syndrome* of behaviors. It is many symptoms pointing towards the same cause. That cause is distress over a separation or breaking of a social tie. Not all dogs that are destructive when left home alone have separation anxiety. Most are simply employing themselves to stave off boredom. Not all dogs that eliminate when left home alone have separation anxiety. Most are simply not fully potty trained. Not all dogs that bark when left home alone have separation anxiety. Most are simply saying hello to neighbors out the window. Always rule out these more common causes of unruly behavior before assuming it is separation anxiety.

The cause of separation anxiety is still somewhat unclear. Many people think it is an out of context exaggeration of a dog's natural desire to be integrated into a social group. Most social animals show some signs of distress when a social tie is broken. For dogs with separation anxiety this behavior is extreme and appears as an inappropriate response to the separation. Alone time for dogs is always mildly upsetting. But, for dogs with separation anxiety it is terrifying.

Dogs with separation anxiety are not acting anger or revenge. They are reacting to uncontrollable fear. They are terrified.

Drs Victoria Voith and Peter Borchelt found certain predisposing factors that correlated to dogs with separation anxiety. These aren't necessarily things that caused separation anxiety. Instead, they were common factors in many dogs with separation anxiety.

- Constant presence of owner for a long period of time (maternity leave, vacation, summer break from school, layoff) followed by long periods of separation (return to work or school).
- Boarding kennel stay / long separation from owner.
- Death or divorce of important household member.
- Rehoming (owner surrender / abandonment).
- Illness, trauma, air shipping as a puppy.
- Physical illness associated with old age.

Fortunately it is possible to lead a dog out of separation anxiety. All North Coast Dogs in-home trainers have received specialized education in separation anxiety from the San Francisco SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers. We'll help you assess whether or not your dog really has separation anxiety. We'll lay out a training plan with a long-term goal of leaving your dog *all day* without any damage or injury. We'll also help you to minimize the risk of damage while you are training. We'll also provide you with information to help you decide if veterinary prescribed medication might assist in training.

There is hope and we're happy to help.