



## **Separation anxiety & the canine bond with humans;**

### **Prevention amidst a pandemic**

Being social and bonding to humans is a trait in dogs that was genetically selected for as dogs evolved into their domesticated state with their human counterparts. It seems that dogs that were naturally social would be more likely to have access to protection, food and other resources, and thus, their domestication over the millennia has contributed to creating their unique bond with people. Their unconditional adoration of us is a comfort as we navigate a complex social world, and makes them all the more desirable as our truest and most loving companions.

These days, rather than being stressed by busy schedules that often results in more sensitive animals showing signs of distress when separated from their attachment figures, as some puppies are, we find dogs of all ages that have been recently adopted, young and old alike, are enjoying the constant companionship of their people during this extended period of not being “home alone”.

This shift in how we conduct our daily lives has dramatically increased the risk for the development of separation anxiety in pets that never had it, creating “velcro dogs” as we navigate extended lockdown periods. In many established pet- family households, as we have become inconsistent in our own behavior, our pets find they can no longer predict their “routine” which may increase stress and frustration. The result? Confusion, and in some cases, great frustration, may lead to other displacement behaviors such as excessive barking or destructive behaviors. For newly adopted pets and puppies, it is essential to build up their independence, rather than conditioning them to constant companionship.

Ultimately, when pet owners return to more normal daily life activities and work schedules, many dogs will find themselves unable to cope, resulting in levels of distress and anxiety that produce a variety of unwanted behaviors, that can also be heartbreaking to witness.

Separation anxiety can manifest a number of behaviors that put the human animal bond in jeopardy, as our pets are not just sad or disappointed when left alone, they experience extreme distress that does not improve unless it is treated. Separation anxiety induced responses may include self-injurious behaviors, destructive behaviors, excessive vocalizations, pacing, drooling and problems with uncontrolled elimination.

Prevention of the development of this serious behavioral outcome is essential to the health and well-being of your pet, not to mention your peace of mind. The simple adoption and application each day of the following guidelines can help dog owners prepare their dogs for life after the pandemic, keeping the unique bond between them intact when pre-pandemic daily life resumes!

### **Separation Anxiety: Prevention Guidelines**

Independence training, exercise and enrichment activities for a period of several weeks prior to your return to normal life activities will help ease the transition for all family members!

#### **Independence training:**

- Watch for any increase in attachment behaviors, such as following you around the house, and even into the bathroom!
- Discourage excessive attachment behaviors by teaching a “go to place” or “down settle” activity in a place of their own, with mental stimulation for more active, working breeds
- Mental stimulation can include puzzle toys, stuffed kongs, etc. Reward with attention whenever your pet chooses their “alone time”
- Your attention is a powerful reinforcer, so apply this principle to encourage the behavioral outcomes you want. For example, when your dog is following you around, redirect your pet to settle “in their place”, and provide lots of positive attention and love when your pet complies
- Make sure you go out at least once per day and leave your pet at home alone. Go sit in your car if necessary, or just take a walk without them, or go to the grocery store

- Observe your pet's behavior using in home security devices or one of several created for at home monitoring for pets to determine if there are signs of anxiety developing such as pacing, drooling, excessive vocalization or whining behaviors
- If your dog is experiencing any symptoms of anxiety, begin departures in small increments, setting a baseline for how long you are absent on the length of time your dog remains settled before any signs of distress begin
- For example, if your pet begins to display signs of distress after five minutes has passed, begin with departures at 5 minutes, and increase them slowly each time you go out, tracking the increase with each departure daily
- Build up the time you are away gradually, in small increments before you return to work or school
- When your dog can stay alone for 30 minutes without exhibiting any of the symptoms associated with separation anxiety, this will indicate you may begin to introduce more extended periods, without your pet becoming distressed by your absence. Working towards a period of four hours of alone time successfully is recommended before leaving your dog alone all day.
- Never, ever confine a pet that is experiencing symptoms of separation anxiety in a crate or a closed off room when you are out.
- Instead, arrange to have a friend or family member stay with your pet until you can successfully leave your dog alone for at least an hour without signs of distress

### **Exercise and socialize daily**

- Working breeds need to run daily. Make sure to provide this outlet to reduce anxiety and stress. All dogs need physical and mental stimulation, albeit at different levels.
- Daily walks for your dog are paramount to maintaining good social cues and interactions! Our dogs thrive on consistency and predictability, so maintaining this daily routine will do wonders for easing frustration or distress related to changes in your schedule.
- Reward desired behavior when it occurs, rather than providing attention every time your pet comes to you for reassurance

### **Create enrichment activities for daily calm**

- Take your dog with you on some errands intermittently when possible, but not each and every time you go out
- Build some prep time into your schedule prior to each business -related conference, Zoom call or departure if your pet has developed stress related responses to any of these activities, introducing enrichment or training activities, such as practicing verbal cues and hand signals, and “go to place” time, with mental stimulation

- Continue socialization with other dogs and people regularly, as a way to prevent reactivity later on as our lives begin to ‘normalize’
- Introduce your dog to a qualified, professional dog walker, so the transition ahead will go more smoothly for you both
- Dog appeasing pheromones such as DAP, the introduction of nutraceuticals or the use of white noise may also help reduce anxiety, promoting daily calm. Be sure to introduce these prior to your return to work or school life.
- Using enrichment activities, training sessions and calming tools can set your dog up for success by preparing ahead for life after the pandemic

### **Seek professional help early, when needed**

Be prepared to reach out early for professional help if your dog shows signs of distress. Some dogs will require an adjustment period, so early intervention can support each dog’s individual need for social interaction, stimulation and enrichment. Dogs are living beings with emotional and behavioral needs, just like us, and meeting those needs is paramount to maintaining their ongoing well-being.

**Contact Animal Behavior & Healing here:**

<https://animalbehaviorhealing.com>

**for more information or to schedule a consultation**