Understanding Separation Anxiety

What is separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a panic issue, a fear of being home alone. Dogs in the clutches of this condition are experiencing a genuine phobia about alone time as it is terrifying for them. Have you ever known or met someone afraid of flying, spiders, or perhaps public speaking? If so, then you recognize how real that fear feels to them and how debilitating it can be. Dogs struggling with separation anxiety are having a hard time, not giving you a hard time.

What are some common indicators of separation anxiety?

Many dogs will display one or more of the following behaviors when home alone:

- Periods of crying, barking, or howling.
- Uncontrollable urinating or defecating.
- Destruction of furniture, walls, windows, doors, or flooring.
- Self-injury while attempting to escape.
- Pacing, panting, and/or drooling.

These behaviors are distressing for both the dog and their humans, though please remember that your dog is not acting out of spite, but rather fear, and that you did not cause your dog's fear of alone time. *This is not, nor could it be, your fault.*

What causes separation anxiety?

We know a lot about what *does not* cause it; yet, we know very little about what does. There are studies to suggest that genetics likely play a role in separation anxiety, so don't believe the myth that only dogs from shelters and rescues are afflicted. Recent research has also dispelled a few other causation myths. Separation anxiety *is not caused* by showing your dog affection, letting them sleep in your bed, celebrating their birthday, taking them with you everywhere, or a lack of structure.

Is separation anxiety treatable?

Yes! Just like any fear, phobia, or anxiety issue there are positive treatments that can make a difference. The most efficient and effective way - the gold standard - to help dogs overcome their separation anxiety is a process called "systematic desensitization." This process involves beginning with a period of alone time that is not stressful for your dog, which may be a very tiny amount (that is OK), and then gradually and systematically increasing that exposure as they start to learn alone time can feel safe. Over time, this process helps your dog to be comfortable for longer stretches and be alone as needed without distress.

Can I leave my dog home alone?

One requirement of helping a dog with separation anxiety is not exposing them to any terrifying alone-time, whether managing the issue or working a training protocol. This does not mean you need to be with your dog 24/7 – friends, family, pet sitters, daycare, and other creative options will do. Remember, the goal is to change your dog's emotional response to alone time, which means we cannot expose the dog to full-blown scary absences without compromising their welfare and potential for progress.

What about medication?

Research supports the use of behavioral medication in conjunction with behavior modification, as an effective strategy for treating separation anxiety. Consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist to see if your dog may benefit from anti-anxiety medications.

Should I try confinement? Or, food toys?

Confinement: As tempting as it may be to crate or confine a dog with separation anxiety, doing so usually makes the panic much worse. Confinement anxiety is common in dogs with separation anxiety, and most dogs with separation anxiety do much better without being crated. To help your dog not be alone while you have to be away, remember to coordinate care for them with family, friends, a pet sitter, or daycare. Then, consider allowing your dog access to dog-proofed living areas as you practice safe absences.

Food toys: Some dogs are too stressed to eat when left alone, and those that will usually fall into panic the moment the food is gone. Food can also put extra emphasis on the exit routine. Interactive feeding toys can play an amazing role in your dog's overall wellbeing and enrichment, but will not help your dog overcome their fear of alone time. Until a dog feels relaxed and safe alone for at least 30-60 minutes, we do not suggest introducing a food toy.

Where do I turn for support?

You are NOT alone! Emotionally draining and distressing for families, separation anxiety is one of the leading causes for relinquishment and re-homing, so please don't wait until you've reached the end of your rope to reach out for support from a qualified dog trainer or veterinary behaviorist.

Learn more about separation anxiety
https://malenademartini.com/

Explore our resources for guardians
https://malenademartini.com/resources/