

Let's talk about...

Separation Anxiety

Domesticated dogs naturally prefer the companionship of humans. However, there is a difference between your dog amiably following you around the house and howling or defecating when left alone. If your dog's behaviour in your absence seems extreme, they might be experiencing separation anxiety.

Signs of separation anxiety

Canine separation anxiety is a set of behaviours that occurs in some dogs when their owners are not present. This includes:

- Destruction
- Vocalisation
- Urinating or stooling
- Not eating
- Drooling
- Escape attempts
- Depression

A word of caution - the signs above are not always indicative of separation anxiety. They could also suggest boredom, lack of exercise, incomplete house-training or certain medical conditions.

Treatment

It is important to talk to a veterinary behaviourist for an accurate diagnosis and treatment plan. There is a vast amount of miss information online about the treatment of separation anxiety. Intervention is usually a combination of medication and behaviour modification, depending on the severity of the condition. Pharmacological assistance is sometimes



Let's talk about...

Separation Anxiety

necessary to provide a window of opportunity to undertake behaviour modification, which can sometimes be difficult to implement in day-to-day situations.

The below exercises only give an understanding of the behavioural principles present in separation anxiety.

The Calming Yo-Yo exercise

This exercise is designed to teach a dog how to remain calm during short, controlled absences from their owner. It can be helpful for dogs who suffer from mild to severe separation anxiety. There is no way to know if the exercise produces changes in a dog's internal emotional state. However, it is observed behaviour that leads us to believe a dog is anxious in the first place. The exercise demonstrates to the dog that being calm is the quickest, most reliable way to bring their owner back. Becoming anxious, whining, barking, stamping, panting excessively, or straining at the restraint won't achieve this. The insights gained from this simple exercise make it less likely serious errors will occur when attempting more complex behaviour modification. If a dog has a strong reaction to this exercise, promptly consult a competent behaviourist.

The exercise starts simply and works up. It is important to make it easy for the dog to succeed at every step. Without success, there is nothing to reinforce; without reinforcement there is less of the desired behaviour.



Let's talk about...

Separation Anxiety

Preparation

- Find some way to restrain the dog so that they can't follow you (e.g. a tether, crate, baby gate, or helper). If possible it may help to repeat the exercise with different restraints; depending on the situation it will be more practical to use one device over another.
- Make sure that your dog is in a harness or a wide, flat buckle collar fixed to a hook, post, or door handle. Leave just enough leash length for your dog to sit, lie down, or turn around.
- Start by standing immediately in front of your dog. Be quiet and calm. Don't give any cues.
- If your dog is excited, wait for them to calm down before beginning. Allow plenty of time to complete the exercise; don't abandon partway through if your dog is displaying anxious behaviours.

Raising criteria with the 300 Peck Method

The below steps are known as the "300 Peck" method. It involves raising the criteria by one step each trial until failure, and then resetting to one and starting again. It is an easy way to raise criteria while achieving a high rate of success.

- Take one step away from your dog. If he is calm, click your clicker and return to your dog.
- Take two steps away from your dog. If he is calm, click and return.
- Take three steps away from your dog. If he is calm, click and return.
- If he is not calm, wait quietly until he calms down, then click and return. Then start again.



Let's talk about...

Separation Anxiety

Progression

- Change the room - you'll soon run out of room have to go through a doorway, out of sight. This is a big step therefore in order to follow the "set your dog up for success" policy, don't attempt it just yet. Instead take the dog to another room and repeat from the start. Do this in several locations.
- Take outside – performing the exercise outside allows you to take many steps, whilst remaining in sight.
- When your dog remains calm after you take 20-25 steps away, go back to the first room and try an "out-of-sight" trial. Use a duration criterion rather than distance; count the seconds out of sight instead of the steps. The aim is to stay away from your dog for long periods without them displaying anxiety. A baby monitor can be helpful so when you are a long distance away you can still hear your dog.

What if my dog fails?

If your dog shows anxious behaviour at any of the steps wait for calm, then click and return. Reset your criteria to one step away and try again. Anxious behaviour looks and sounds terrible, but it can't go on forever. If your dog (or anyone nearby) is not coming to any physical harm, wait it out. If you really can't, at least hang on for a reduction in the behaviour before you return. If the anxious behaviour is extreme, seek professional help sooner rather than later!

Where are the treats?

This exercise does not promote the use of usual rewards such as treats or play. If your dog has separation anxiety, all he wants is for you to be near him, your return is an effective reinforcer. Any other reward is unnecessary and can fail to communicate the intention of the exercise. If you toss a treat, you are not demonstrating that you always come back when he is calm, but



Let's talk about...

Separation Anxiety

instead that he earns a treat. This may or may not be a good reinforcer for a dog suffering from separation anxiety.

When your return is an adequate reinforcer this will be evident by the effectiveness of the exercise (improved calm behaviour, increasing the distance and duration of separation). If progression does not occur, discontinue until you have sought advice from a behaviourist. In any case of separation anxiety there can be aspects that require treatment and guidance from a competent and qualified professional.

