

WOODVALE PARK

VETERINARY HOSPITAL



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Help Your Dog Cope With Being Alone

Separation anxiety refers to the distress that some dogs feel in the absence of a person (or less often, an animal) to whom they are highly attached. The anxiety can be expressed in one or more ways including vocalisation (barking, whining), destructive behaviour salivation, pacing, house-soiling, escaping or depression.

These undesirable behaviours need to be prevented from recurring in the short term. Anxiety is a cascade type of phenomenon – once you get upset it is easier to become more upset very quickly. The memory of the unpleasant experience the last time anxiety occurred will make the situation even more stressful for the dog on the next occasion. Hence, the need to avoid these episodes whenever possible, until there is time to implement longer term strategies which will enable the dog to cope with separation without distress. Here are some short-term strategies that can help your dog cope.

Denning and “Dog-sitting”

Some mildly affected dogs may accept confinement in an exercise pen, crate, cubby or den. It ideal if an item such as an unwashed sweater can be placed with the dog, together with appropriate chew toys such as Kongs. Some dogs may prefer the car and settle better here. However, beware on warm days and in cases where the dog is very destructive. Another alternative is access to a place closely associated with the owner such as a couch or bed. You may have a friend or neighbour who is willing to check on the dog at certain intervals or temporarily “dog-sit”, or “doggie day-care” at a veterinary hospital or boarding kennels at those times early in the programme when you just have to leave home, can be a great help.

Departure Routines

Many dogs will readily identify departure routines and use these as cues to become distressed. Ideally we need to try and identify ways that will relax the dog and help him tolerate your departure better. It is useful to carry out activities such as picking up keys, packing a briefcase or putting on a uniform but then staying at home. Practice these “mock” departures many times. Alternatively, you might be aware of a cue that helps your dog to relax e.g. putting on joggers indicates a short departure for a morning jog. You might put these joggers on and go to work. This can help to ensure the dog is unable to reliably predict which activities precede your departure.

“Relaxation” Cues

On days where you are leaving the dog for very short periods only, you can start to develop some specific cues that indicate your return is imminent. These could include such things as a particular piece of music playing, an unlit vanilla candle, a special blanket or rug, a novel toy etc. These signal to the dog that the departures are “safe” and that you will be back very soon and can be provided during the desensitisation programme set out in *small steps towards the final goal*. These items MUST be removed at other times or they will lose their significance.

Greetings and Departures

Greetings and departures should be downplayed. The dog should be ignored for 15 minutes before you leave and for 15 minutes on your return. This helps to avoid the intense highs and lows that are contributing to the anxiety levels your pet is experiencing. Setting a light or radio on timer programmed to come on 30 minutes before your arrival home can help to defuse the sudden nature of your return.

If you are having any difficulty with any of the programmes please don't hesitate to contact your veterinarian for assistance.

Guilt

In the case of dogs with separation anxiety we often come home to find precious things destroyed or urine or faeces on the carpet. Our bodies get tense and we speak with a loud, stern voice. Dogs are very sensitive to body language – this is a large part of their communication to each other. You think your dog looks “guilty” for what he has done! But, in reality he is just responding to your angry body language and submitting to your authority.

Some dogs will cower before you even have the opportunity to assess if any damage has been done. This is because they have learnt from past experience that you are displeased if there is destruction or soiling, not as a result of guilt about making the mess. In fact, your dog would show exactly the same reaction if another dog was responsible for the problem. Punishment in these circumstances will only make him more anxious and the signs of distress will get worse. Remember he is not doing this out of spite but because he is anxious about being left alone.

