

Anxiety in Pets

You might think that our pets are immune to some of the psychological maladies we endure as humans. While they do not have to worry about the price of gasoline, where their next meal is coming from, a fear of mortality or sending puppies or kittens away to college, they do exhibit the symptoms of anxiety.

The most common type of anxiety in pets is called separation anxiety. Its causes are multiple; with possible genetic and environmental factors contributing to the most common symptoms.

The most endearing qualities of our pets are their loyalty and unconditional love. They are social animals, and become intensely bonded to family members. However, when this affection turns into psychological stress, the very relationship that your dog desires can be threatened by inappropriate behavior related to anxiety.

To a pet with separation anxiety, the absence of a family member may be interpreted as abandonment. We cannot be certain of the etiology or cause of this malady, however, the signs are very unpleasant and are often misinterpreted and treated in a way that may seem intuitive, but actually worsens the situation.

At our clinic, we diagnose this problem by interpreting the symptoms and timing of the inappropriate behavior. The most common signs are barking, whining, and pacing when a family member leaves or returns to the house. A dog with separation anxiety may cause destruction to physical property, exhibit inappropriate elimination habits or have other traits which undermine a peaceful relationship in the home. Many pet owners mistakenly think this behavior is the pet's attempt to "get back" at their owner for leaving them alone, but that is far from the case. What is really going on is intense fear and anxiety.

The treatment for this condition is behavior modification and the use of a medication frequently used for people who suffer from depression. The goal is to use medication as an aid in treatment and to discontinue its use as soon as a positive change in behavior is accomplished.

Animal behaviorists have learned that positive reinforcement for good behavior is much more effective than reprimanding undesirable behavior. For a dog suffering from separation anxiety, negative attention only adds to the anxiety and confusion he or she is already feeling.

A mindful pet owner will ignore attention seeking behaviors and only spend time with the pet in a state of calm. At this time, reinforce the positive behavior with affection and special treats.

It is essential to remove the inciting cause of the separation rama. Try playacting the departure routine by putting on your coat and handling your keys. Then just put them away without actually leaving. Ignore inappropriate behavior and only acknowledge a behavior that is calm and receptive to positive re-enforcement.

With the aid of certain pharmaceuticals and behavior modification programs, 73% of dogs improved in a study of separation anxiety in pets. 43% actually showed improvement after only one week. Consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary specialist in animal behavior. She or he will guide you through a program designed to alter the behavior which is interfering with a pet being integrated into a family in a joyful and peaceful way.