



### SEPARATION ANXIETY

Dogs are social pack animals – they prefer being with others. Usually dogs learn to be alone for periods of time without a problem, but for some, being alone is unacceptable. Separation anxiety in dogs is much like a panic attack in a person. Symptoms usually start within 20-40 minutes after the owner leaves the home.

Signs of separation anxiety include urinating or defecating in the house, scratching, biting, and digging at doors (sometimes until they break nails or teeth), barking and other vocalizations whenever the dog is left alone. Owners sometimes come home to find pillows, furniture or other household items destroyed.

Separation anxiety is often triggered by a major change in a dog's normal routine or by a traumatic event (from the dog's point of view). A few examples are: a new job that takes the pet owner away from home all day; an extended stay at a boarding facility when the pet has never been away from home; the death of a family member, especially one the pet was very close to; a family household relocation; or a child leaving for college.

#### WHAT TO DO

- Keep arrivals and departures uneventful and low key – pets frequently recognize the signs of departure, so do not give them extra attention when leaving. Also, ignore the pet the first few minutes after returning. Exuberant displays of affection may actually encourage anxiety (the pet feels rewarded when you return). So stay calm.
- Give the pet something to do – mental and physical exercise is important to combat separation anxiety. Toys and physical activities provide mental and physical stimulation which help a dog gain confidence. A confident pet will rely less on human contact for stimulation.
- Give the dog a mental cue that you are leaving – something consistent like using a word/phrase that the pet will recognize as something you say every time you leave and return.
- Practice leaving – get everything ready to go, then sit down. Get ready and go to the door, then sit back down. Get ready, go out the door, close the door for a few seconds and re-enter. The idea is to provide short stimulation in the act of leaving, but prevent the dog from going into a panic attack. Repeat each move several times until the pet feels comfortable. Then take the next step a little further. Once the pet can handle absences of a few minutes, increase the time periods gradually. Once an owner can leave for 30 or 40 minutes, separation anxiety should no longer be much of a problem. Be aware these steps will need to be done slowly and repeatedly for days to break the cycle.
- For severe separation anxiety consult a dog trainer or behaviorist. In severe cases, a pet sitter or daycare might be required so the pet is never alone.
- Talk to your veterinarian to see if one of the anti-anxiety drugs available for pets might be right for your dog.