



SEPARATION ANXIETY

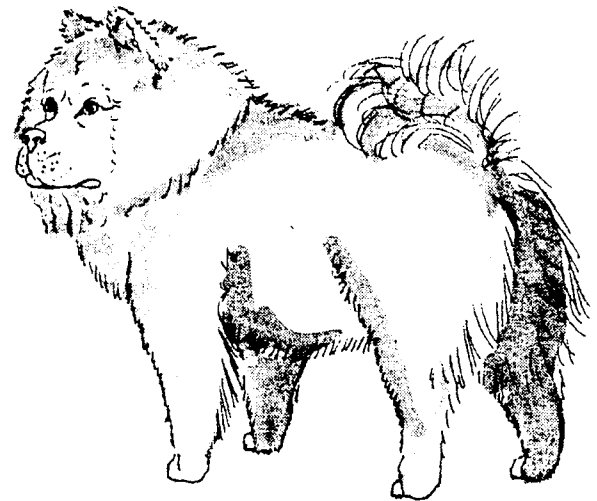
Cats and dogs can become anxious upon separation from their human caretakers, even if the separation is temporary. When a pet is not accustomed to being alone, it may need to adjust to isolation. Separation anxiety can be manifested as barking, whining, destructiveness, self-inflicted wounds, excessive grooming, and inappropriate elimination. It may occur in pets of any age.

Signs of separation anxiety may suddenly occur in an aging pet that has never previously had a problem when away from you or left alone. Particularly in older dogs, this may result from physical changes relating to age or to an undiagnosed medical problem. Inappropriate urination may be associated with various physical ailments. When medical causes have been ruled out, behavioral modification can be used to relieve separation anxiety. Certain types of medication may also be used with this training.

When your pet is young, gradually accustom it to progressively longer periods of separation. Precede anticipated absences with "quality time." When you are about to leave, give your pet an attractive chew toy that is available only when you are absent. Practice periods of separation can be very helpful if separation anxiety is a problem for your young adult or adult pet. For example, on a nonworkday, go through your usual routine as if preparing to leave for work, but do not go anywhere.

Practice "down/stay" with your dog for longer and longer periods as you move farther and farther away, eventually leaving the house for several minutes. Begin with brief training sessions (less than 5 minutes) and then extend these progressively (one-half hour or longer) over the course of several weeks. Return only if your dog is calm and remains still. Release the dog from "stay" by giving the command to "come" or "okay."

Because anxiety builds as your pet anticipates your departure, try to rearrange your departure routine so that your pet is no longer able to reliably predict when you are about to leave. This may be why the most intense displays of separation anxiety



occur within the first 10 minutes or so of departure.

Pets are sensitive to our moods and actions. When we are anxious, rushed, or excited, their level of arousal increases. Pets that are trained to be calm and controlled in general are more likely to remain calm under stressful conditions, for example, when they are left alone. If we teach them that it is a "big deal" when we leave and return, they will also think it's a "big deal" when we are not there. Make your departures and arrivals home a calm and controlled experience. Do not make long goodbye speeches; just leave. Avoid exuberant greetings in excited tones of voice; rather, quietly insist that your dog sit and stay so as to earn your presence.

Make certain that the time you are together is filled with as much enjoyable interaction as possible. The more you play with your pet, the less likely it will amuse itself with inappropriate diversions when you leave. The more frequent or longer your dog's walks are,

the more likely it will be to sleep through your absence. Include your pet in your activities while you are home. Give it praise and attention for being good, such as when it is lying quietly at your feet, so that it does not need to resort to inappropriate attention-seeking behavior.

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Inappropriate Elimination During Isolation

Cats and dogs may urinate and defecate in the home when they are left alone. A pet may urinate or defecate anywhere in the home, but frequently the owner's bed, personal effects, or clothing left on the floor may be targeted.

It is counterproductive to punish a pet for this undesirable behavior. Punishment for voiding in undesirable locations is particularly ineffective if there is any lapse of time (even a few minutes) since the behavior was performed. Your pet cannot relate its action to your unhappy response unless the two events occur closely in time. Even if you catch your pet "in the act," do not punish the animal. Rubbing your pet's nose in a puddle of urine or a pile of feces is unproductive and cruel.

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Prevention is the basis for resolving elimination problems related to isolation. Block access to the target area. It is essential to prevent or discourage your pet from returning there. The more often the pet is allowed to repeat the pattern, the more likely this will become a long-term habit. Close the door to the targeted room or place a barrier, such as a gate, across its entrance. Make the area unattractive for elimination by feeding your pet there. Leave a bowl of water on the spot.

Disinfect and deodorize the soiled area. Consult your veterinarian for recommendations for effective products available in your area. Change the surface odor or make it offensive with the scent of bitter apple, citrus, or mint. Find the scent that your pet dislikes by trial and error. Be creative. Every pet responds differently and may require a combination of techniques. If your initial attempts fail, ask for a referral to a veterinary behavior consultant.

Although crate training may be an attractive solution to problems associated with separation anxiety, it may only make matters worse. Some pets react violently to this type of confinement. An anxious pet will soil even when it is confined. It may also become even more panicked when it is confined and alone. If you decide to crate train your pet, do so very gradually. The crate must be a place of refuge and comfort. Never place a pet in its crate as punishment.

Destructiveness During Isolation

In an owner's absence, dogs may chew, dig, scratch, or knock over objects. An anxious dog may direct its anxiety toward an obstacle that blocks its escape from confinement, such as a gate, door, door frame, or window sill. It may vent its frustration on upholstery or wooden furniture, or seek objects on elevated surfaces. Gaining access to difficult to reach or forbidden objects may be more challenging and therefore more stimulating to certain dogs.

It is always important to remove potentially attractive targets before periods of isolation. Fragile possessions and things that may be swallowed must be cleared away. Concentrate on ways to prevent anxiety, such as increasing your pet's exercise and positive social interaction when you are home. Confinement to a crate or pet-proof room may be necessary but does not replace any of the steps outlined above.

Barking During Isolation

Dogs may bark when they are anxious. This can disturb you and your neighbors, especially if it occurs at night. Complaints from neighbors, threats of eviction, or action by local authorities often motivate pet owners to correct problem barking.

The general approach to resolving barking associated with separation anxiety is outlined above. Sedatives may help your pet become accustomed to isolation. Because it is important to be consistent with training, do not encourage barking even when you are present. Your pet will be less likely to become vocal when you are absent.

Anti-barking collars that deliver painful electric shocks to the dog's throat should be used only under the guidance of a veterinary behaviorist and do not replace the need for additional attention, activity, and specific retraining exercises. Collars can fail, and other methods must be in place to support their benefits, if any. Citronella collars, previously mentioned, are a more attractive alternative but other methods must take precedence.

Depression Associated With Isolation

Following an initial period of intense emotional reaction to the owner's departure (the first half hour is generally the most sensitive time), a pet may spend the remainder of the time in an emotionally withdrawn state of lethargy. Depression in pets is manifested as withdrawal from social interaction, and a decrease in playful behavior, appetite, and grooming. Many pet owners find the meal that

was left for their pet untouched during their absence. It should be noted that many pets, even those who are not clinically depressed, will not eat unless their owners are present. Feeding is socially facilitated, but a depressed pet will be less affected, if at all, by the presence of its owners.

It is important to satisfy your pet's basic requirements for exercise and positive social interaction when you are available so that by the time you leave it will be content to rest peacefully until you return.

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