



# Otonabee Animal Hospital

“Going the distance for you and your pet!”

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## September 2017 Newsletter

### Separation Anxiety

“My dog punishes me by wrecking the couch cushions if I leave her alone too long.”

“My dog chews up my shoes while I’m out to let me know he’s mad at me.”

“Mine barks constantly when he’s alone plus he pees on my bed sometimes – and I know he can hold his bladder longer than that!”

Does any of this sound familiar? Are your neighbours complaining about barking when you’re out? Chances are your dog has **separation anxiety** – although in the case of inappropriate soiling, medical causes should always be ruled out first.

A common mistake made by owners is to assume their pet is acting out of boredom or anger at being left behind. However, true separation anxiety in dogs is **comparable to panic attacks in humans** and dogs suffering from this disorder have no control over the way they behave or the anxiety they feel.

Below are some excerpts from the Lifelearn handout on separation anxiety. If you feel this may be a problem one or more of your dogs has, and would like the full information, please contact us in the usual way & we will be happy to get a copy to you.

#### How do I know if my pet's problem is due to separation anxiety?



Separation anxiety describes dogs that usually are overly attached or dependent on family members. They become extremely anxious and show distress behaviors such as vocalization, destruction, or house-soiling when separated from their owners. Most dogs with separation anxiety try to remain close to their owners, follow them from room to room and rarely spend time outdoors alone. They often begin to display anxiety as soon as the owners prepare to leave. Many but not all of these dogs crave a great deal of physical contact and attention from their owners. During departures or separations, in addition to vocalization, destruction and elimination, they may be restless, shake, shiver, salivate, refuse to eat, or become quiet and

withdrawn. While typically the behavior occurs every time the owner leaves, in some cases it may only happen on selected departures, such as work-day departures, or when the owner leaves again after coming home from work. Dogs with separation anxiety are also often quite excited and aroused when the owner returns.

**Separation anxiety might be prevented** by insuring that puppies have scheduled times where they learn to spend time alone in their own crates or beds. Some dogs appear to have separation anxiety but are afraid to be home alone because something bad has happened to them while alone, i.e. storms, fireworks etc. Dogs that have both separation anxiety and noise or storm phobias will need treatment for both problems.

#### The steps you need to follow are:

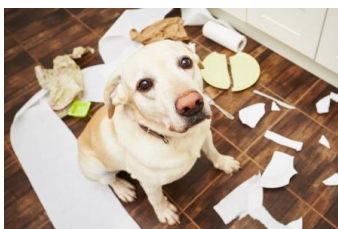
1. Establish a predictable routine
2. Environmental enrichment – meeting your dog's needs. During the times when you are interacting with your pet, make sure that you are meeting all of its needs for social interactions, play, exercise, training, and elimination. In effect, you should initiate enough regular interactive sessions and provide enough play and attention so that when each



session is over, your pet is prepared to settle down and relax. At this point, new exploratory and chew toys can be given so that the pet has novel and motivating toys on which to focus when it is time to settle. Feeding toys can also replace standard food bowls to make feeding time more of a mental and physical effort.

### 3. Establish a predictable protocol for rewards

If your dog has separation anxiety, it's likely that your pet's favored rewards are the attention and play that you provide. Treats, food, play and chew toys may also be highly desirable to the pet.



### 4. Train settle (see 'Training Dogs – Settle and Relaxation Training' handout)

The goal of training is that your dog learns to settle comfortably on cue.

5. Develop an area and surface for relaxation. Having a bed or mat location (in a room, pen, or crate) where your dog can be taught to rest, nap, play with its toys or even sleep, can provide a secure area where your pet might settle when you are not home.

6. For some dogs it also is useful to work on responses to simple commands and having them earn all things. This can be as simple as having the dog respond to a command such as "sit" prior to receiving anything it wants. For example if the dog asks to go outside, prior to opening the door the dog is given the command to "sit" and once it complies, the door is opened. This technique can be used for anything the dog desires. See our handout on 'Training Dogs – Learn to Earn and Predictable Rewards' for other examples.

### When I need to leave, what can I do immediately to prevent damage?

This is an extremely difficult question. The goal of treatment is to reduce your pet's level of anxiety by training it to feel comfortable in your absence. This can be a long process. Yet, most owners will need to deal with the damage or vocalization immediately. During initial retraining it may be best to hire a dog sitter, take the dog to work, find a friend to care for the dog for the day, board the dog for the day, or arrange to take some time off from work to retrain the dog.



### How can the dog be retrained so that it is less anxious during departures?

Since the underlying problem is anxiety, try to reduce all forms of anxiety prior to departure, at the time of departure, and at the time of homecoming. In addition, the pet must learn to accept progressively longer periods of inattention and separation while the owners are at home.

### What should be done prior to departures?

Before any lengthy departure, provide a vigorous session of play and exercise. This not only helps to reduce some of the dog's energy and tire it out, but also provides a period of attention. A training session can also be a productive way to further interact and "work" with your dog. For the final 15–30 minutes prior to departure, the dog should be ignored. It would be best if your dog were taken to its rest and relaxation area with a radio, TV, or video playing. The owner could then prepare for departure while the pet is out of sight and earshot of the owner.

**Avoid saying goodbye** since this will only serve to bring attention to the departure. Another alternative is to expose your dog to as many of these cues as possible while you remain at home so that they no longer are predictive of departure.

### What should I do if I come home to a mess?

If your dog has been anxious during your departure, and this has led to destruction or housesoiling, then anything you do may increase your pet's anxiety, making matters worse for future departures and it will not correct what has already been done. Therefore **both punishment and excited greetings must be avoided**. At homecomings, ignore your dog until it settles down (this may take 10–15 minutes). Your dog should soon learn that the faster it settles, the sooner it will get your attention.

*Due to available space the above information is only a small portion of the handout; there is much more detail both in understanding and training/retraining any dog who has this problem. As previously mentioned, if you think your dog may have separation anxiety, please contact us for more help & information. There are several different drug-free aids available for helping with canine anxiety – therefore helping them to be more successful in their training. In extreme cases something may need to be prescribed as a short-term aid to training & anxiety relief.*

