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SEPARATION ANXIETY

Separation anxiety (later to be referred to as SA) is a common behavior disorder that affects dogs of any age, breed or sex. Dogs with SA become distressed when isolated from their caregiver. History often reveals a dog that was: orphaned or hand-raised; adopted from a shelter or rescue. The four most common manifestations of SA include one or a combination of the following:

Vocalization

Howling, barking, whining; often described as having a distressed, frightened, frantic, or even mournful tone

Destruction

Primarily directed at a point of exit or barrier or objects that frequently contact the caregiver's body

Elimination

Rule out medical conditions first

Increased autonomic activity

Dilated pupils, salivating, increased respiratory rate

Distress-related illness

Vomiting, diarrhea, anorexia, inactivity; rule out medical conditions first.

A dog with only SA will not exhibit these behaviors in the presence of the caregiver.

For your veterinarian to properly diagnose your dog with SA, make a detailed typical 24 hour day including the activities of each household member as well as the dog's activities and responses. Video or audio recordings of the "home alone" dog may be helpful. A dog with SA is likely to be a "velcro" dog when the primary attachment figure is home and often will exhibit extreme excitement upon the caregiver's return home. Many caregivers think these behaviors are cute and fail to mention them because they do not perceive either behavior as part of the problem. Alternative causes of clinical signs must be ruled out before diagnosing a dog with SA. Lack of housetraining, urinary tract disease, lack of physical and/or mental stimulation and gastrointestinal disease are examples of alternative causes.

All dogs diagnosed with SA should receive behavior modification and some may also require prescription medication. Behavior modification requires willingness, cooperation and patience among all persons in the dog's home. Our goal is to reduce the anxiety associated with the owner's departure and absence and teach the dog to be independent. Techniques may include the following:

1. Ignore dog 20 –30 minutes before departure
2. Distraction with highly desired toy or food
3. Identify and remove pre-departure anxiety cues
4. Graduated departures
5. Low key greetings
6. Do not reward anxious behavior
7. Independence training

It is extremely important for the owner to understand their dog's behavior is anxious, not spiteful. Therefore, physical and verbal punishment is contraindicated.