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Seperation anxiety: "NO! NO! don't GO!!!!

Separation anxiety can be defined as increased fearfulness of the dog after the departure of the owner. For example, after their owners leave for work, anxious dogs might bark or howl, have bowel or bladder "accidents," or destroy things. Dogs that form intense attachments with their owners, as Labradors do, are more likely candidates for separation anxiety.

You can start preventing separation anxiety even before you get your puppy. First of all, do not take the puppy away from its mother until it is 8 weeks old. "There is a greater likelihood that your dog will develop separation anxiety if it is taken any earlier," says Dr. Eurell. "Mandy, was taken at 6 weeks, and this may have contributed to her anxiety disorder."

Anti-separation anxiety training can begin when you first bring your puppy home. "When you leave them, don't make a big deal about leaving. Don't prolong your departure by talking to them a lot and arousing their anxiety. Leave them for short periods initially. When you come back, again, don't make it a big deal. Just say 'nice puppy' and go on with your routine," suggests Dr. Eurell.

If your dog already has unwanted separation behavior, training may be more difficult but is definitely worth your effort. A high percentage of older dogs with separation anxiety were shelter dogs or strays at some point in their life. Up to half of these dogs will improve with training, but you may need to modify your routine to desensitize them to your leaving.

Dogs quickly learn your routine. "My dogs know that the last things I do in the morning are spray perfume and brush my teeth. Both of these personal behaviors escalate their 'asking to go along' behavior," says Dr. Eurell. "They also know that the last thing I do before we go out for a walk at night is to turn off the computer. At least this time they know for sure that they get to go along." Your dog figures out your routine in a very short time and may respond with these 'can-I go-can-I-go-can-I-go' routines, which may be a prelude to more destructive behavior.

With these dogs, your first effort is to assess the situation and eliminate cues. As with puppy training, don't make a big deal out of leaving. Desensitize the dogs by leaving for a short time and gradually work up to longer periods.

Another approach is to leave something to distract your pet. Video studies have shown that separation anxiety behavior usually occurs within 10 to 30 minutes of your departure; after that, dogs calm down. Kong toys make good distractions. Kongs are hollow rubber cone-shaped toys. You can fill the center with kibble or cheese. It takes the dog awhile to get to the treat, and meanwhile they are distracted from their separation anxiety.

Crate training is another good option. I used to crate my dog Maxie when I first moved to an apartment with new roommates. Even though she'd shown destructive behavior only when she was younger, I had nightmares about her getting into one of my roommate's rooms and eating a new stethoscope or goose-down comforter. So until my roommates and I felt comfortable with Maxie loose in the house by herself, the crate was her home while we were away.

I fed her in her crate and never punished her by putting her in the crate when she was bad, so it became something she associated with positive things ... sleep and food. Finally the day came where we let her roam free while we were gone. I was a bit anxious myself while we were away that day, hoping that when we came back from vet school there wouldn't be a disaster. And I became more worried when Maxie didn't greet us at the door. And guess where we found her ... downstairs asleep in her crate with the crate door open.

"Dogs are den animals, and the crate is a place they can call their own. If you crate from an early age, you always use the crate as a positive experience, and you have a crate large enough for the dog to comfortably stand, turn around, and lie down, then crates can be a great training tool," explains Dr. Eurell. "Crates can also give you peace of mind that your dog isn't able to destroy something or potentially injure themselves while you're gone."

Seek out a veterinarian or professional trainer for other training ideas, but remember that because of the circumstances when separation anxiety arises, most of the training will require changes in your own behavior. It's not something a trainer can do for you. Veterinary prescribed drugs are an option as well, but try training first.

Good luck and keep having fun with your devoted dog.