

How to Manage Dog Separation Anxiety

6 strategies to ease your dog's separation anxiety.

Maureen Kochan

Crista Coppola's friends laughed when they saw the perfect circle that her Doberman Pinscher mix Jessie had carved in the backyard during hours of anxious pacing when left alone.

"I didn't know any better at the time," says Coppola, who was 16 when she got Jessie as a puppy.

Fast-forward more than a decade, and Coppola is a certified applied animal behaviorist at the ASPCA Animal Behavior Center in Illinois and an adjunct professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, with a doctorate in animal behavior. Today she clearly recognizes Jessie's solitary pacing as one of the first signs of her beloved dog's lifelong struggle with separation anxiety.

The condition, which causes dogs to panic when left alone, afflicts an unknown number of dogs each year. One study in the journal *Applied Animal Behavior Science* suggests that 14 percent of dogs seen for routine veterinary care show some symptom of separation anxiety. That number rockets to 40 percent among dogs being seen for behavior-related problems.

When Coppola moved to New York City three years ago to do a postgraduate fellowship, Jessie grew even worse, eschewing food or defecating in the apartment when left alone. "Dogs with separation anxiety cope the best they can," Coppola says. "When their environment changes, they can become less flexible and less able to cope."

Coppola put Jessie, who died in January, on various medications for anxiety, gave her tons of exercise, and even set up a webcam to monitor the dog's well-being. Still, Coppola rarely left Jessie alone except to go to school or work. "A lot of my life was dictated by my responsibility for taking care of her," she says.

And while Coppola credits Jessie with helping to shape the career she loves, living with a dog with separation anxiety "takes a toll on you," she says.

Roots of a problem

Dogs are social animals, and staying connected to the pack is often essential for survival, says Valarie Tynes, DVM, an American College of Veterinary Behaviorists diplomate. It's normal for a dog to develop evolved behaviors that ensure it will reunite with its pack, in most cases its human family, she says.

Brandy Duncan, of California would not have considered her dog Neo's destructive behaviors as evolved a few years ago. But after talking to an instructor at a puppy training class, Duncan understood that tearing at doors and destroying furniture were how he coped with his separation anxiety. "We had been killing him with kindness," Duncan says. "We took him everywhere with us, and when we left, made a big production of leaving or coming home."

Torn-up walls or furniture may feel like your dog is punishing you for leaving, but it's simply not the case, Coppola says.

Dogs with separation anxiety dig, chew, or scratch at doors or windows in an attempt to find you. They may also bark, howl, or cry to get you to return. And what about dogs who pace, circle, or eliminate in the house, even when they're housetrained? All signs of distress due to the separation, she says.

Most dogs will eventually get used to being alone. But for others, isolation triggers intense fear and sends a dog's fear response zooming.

"No one really knows why one animal suffers and another animal in a similar environment doesn't," Tynes says. "Most likely, genetic aspects of temperament play a very important role."

Environmental factors can also trigger or intensify a dog's separation anxiety. Examples include changes to the household like a divorce or a move, as in Coppola's case, or a traumatic experience like a long stay at an animal shelter or a night alone when the burglar alarm sounds.

So how do you know if your dog has separation anxiety? Pamela Reid, Ph.D., a certified applied animal behaviorist and vice president of the ASPCA Animal Behavior Center, says it's easy. "It doesn't take a behaviorist to detect anxiety in a dog," she says. "Their body postures are different. They look much more frantic and panicked. Their tails may be tucked, they may pant, tremble."

Because one common symptom and key indication of separation anxiety is that the problem behaviors occur when the dog is left alone, Reid suggests videotaping your dog when you leave to get a better idea of what's happening.

Techniques to try

The following techniques can help manage mild to moderate separation anxiety or prevent it altogether in dogs with no symptoms. If the problem persists after trying these, see your veterinarian for a thorough physical exam to rule out any underlying medical cause for your dog's behavior. For chronic cases, your veterinarian may refer you to a certified behaviorist.

Prescription anti-anxiety medications or products that contain dog appeasing pheromones may also help ease your dog's fear. For dogs with severe separation anxiety, a combination of behavior modification and drug therapy is usually necessary, Tynes says.

Practice gradual departures. Collect your belongings as if you were going out, then leave for a few minutes and return. Increase these training trips by five or 10 minutes at a time until, after a couple of days, you work up to outings lasting a few hours. "This sets your dog up to withstand future longer absences much better," Reid says.

Maintain low-key arrivals and departures. Make a fuss over your dog when you wake up, not when you leave or get home. This helps to remove some of the tension that surrounds the event.

Exercise your dog before you leave. A tired dog is less likely to feel stress when you go.

Crate train. Most dogs feel safe in a small, secure environment, says Lisa Radosta, DVM, DACVB, and owner of Florida Veterinary Behavior Service in West Palm Beach, Fla. However, some dogs won't take to a crate if introduced to it later in life, or if they fear confinement.

Discourage clinginess. Place your dog in a Sit-Stay or Down-Stay to keep her from following you from room to room when you're at home. Praise her quietly when you return to the room she's in.

Give a special treat or chew toy when you leave. "This acts to counter-condition the dog by pairing something great with something that previously was stressful," Radosta says.

Duncan, for one, swears by these moves. Now 7, Neo is symptom-free. Duncan credits crate training, practicing gradual departures, and not fussing over Neo when she or her husband leaves or comes home. She also gives Neo a peanut butter-filled Kong toy before they go out.

"We couldn't believe that such simple things could make so much of a difference," Duncan says.

Maureen Kochan, the former editor of DOG FANCY, is a freelance writer and editor who lives in Southern California.