

Separation Anxiety

By Brenda Howard

“My dog has separation anxiety.” Uh oh, time to understand what that really is and how to best deal with it.

Separation distress is a reaction some dogs have to being separated from their human. These dogs are highly motivated to reconnect with their 2-legger and if not allowed to may turn to various distressed behaviors such as excessive barking, howling, pacing, and loss of bowel or urine control. Most dogs with severe anxiety will become either destructive to themselves or to their environment – chewing up the sofa, or destroying the mini blinds, or chewing themselves, or pulling out their own hair.

There are two factors that contribute to separation distress – the genetic makeup of a dog, and learning or experience. Some breeds (genetic makeup) are more prone to shyness, and this could lead to a behavior problem like fear biting. Quality breeders will try to avoid inherited traits that are unwelcome by the careful selection of individuals with sound temperaments for breeding. Although genetics play an important part in the eventual temperament or soundness of a dog, the majority of behavior problems are learned as the result of negative or adverse experiences. Learned behavior has an excellent chance of being modified through training.

Wow, that’s a lot to think about! The good news is that most dogs do not display elevated or severe separation distress and can be helped through behavioral training.

So then, let’s say that your basset hound, “George,” is a dog that goes absolutely crazy when you leave or when you return to your house. George jumps up and knocks you down, and bellows loudly each and every time you try to leave. This is considered a form of separation anxiety. How do you mold a different behavior?

George might be getting his cue for the excitement from you. If you make a big deal out of coming and going, George is going to experience an elevated since of excitement as a result of your behavior. “Mommy’s going to be back! I promise I’ll be back! Don’t worry George, I’ll be back! BE A GOOD BOY! I’LL BE BACK!” George has picked up on that his 2-legger gets very animated, loud and emotional when leaving. George has been left to sort out what this means and how to react to it. George sadly has chosen a response that is not satisfactory to his owner.

The flip side of the coin happens when George’s owner returns. “I’m back! Oh Georgie, did you miss me!? Wooo Hoo! I’M BACK GEORGE!” Oh my, George has no choice but to become as excited and wound up as he can to mirror his owners over-the-top entrance.

One simple approach to behavior training would be to first change the way you leave the house. Instead of making a huge event of it, simply gather your things and quietly exit the door. Stay on the outside of the door for a few minutes. If George is behaving and being a quite boy, then enter the door. Ignore George for a minute or two while you put your belongings down. (George is jumping, spinning,

barking, and howling). Do not reinforce this behavior by acknowledging George. Now quietly, ask George to sit. Give him a cookie for sitting and rub his chest – tell him, “good boy.” Repeat this as many as 30 times in one training session and increase the time you stay away each time. George learns that quiet behavior (sitting) earns him good things – your attention and food.

The same technique can be used if you also use a crate in your home for your dog. Crates are wonderful “bedrooms” for dogs. Most dogs learn to enjoy their time in their crate. If you use a crate, ask your dog to “crate up” or “go to bed” or whatever cue you normally use. Give your dog a dog safe toy or chew to will occupy him while you are out and leave quietly as described previously. Return quietly.

This is only one of the many ways to begin to work with a dog that you believe may be exhibiting separation distress. Consult with a dog trainer, who may be able to give you specific advice regarding your dog’s issues. Be prepared to make some changes though, or the best advice won’t work.

In the cases of extreme distress, consult your veterinarian. Your vet may be able to prescribe anti-anxiety drugs which, in combination with behavior training, may make a difference in the quality of life your dog enjoys.

Brenda Howard has been training dogs for over 20 years and is a member of The Association of Pet Dog Trainers, The American Bloodhound Club, The Basset Hound Club of America and The Pet Care Services Association (formerly the ABKA).

The information presented here is not intended to substitute for the advice and care of a veterinarian. Please consult your veterinarian regarding all issues relating to your dog’s health.

