



We ask a lot from our dogs when we expect them to fit into our hectic modern lives. Happily most dogs adapt to our lifestyle with seeming ease but there are a few dogs out there for whom the modern way of life can get a bit too stressful at times. Some of these dogs turn to destruction as a way of releasing their feelings. Living with these dogs can be very stressful for owners.

What is separation anxiety?

As its name suggests, this disorder in dogs is caused by distress at being parted from their owner. It seems to be more common in some breeds than others and may partly be the result of poor socialisation in puppyhood.

Why do dogs get separation anxiety?

Dogs like to be part of a pack and (in most cases) see their owner as head of the pack. It is not natural for them to be left alone while the rest of the pack goes off without them. The condition is more common in dogs that have been repeatedly re-homed or moved to new owners when they were less than 1 year old, probably because these animals feel very insecure. The problem becomes worse because when someone re-homes a dog from a kennel and finds out it is destructive, the poor dog is often returned to the kennel for re-homing again.

What triggers separation anxiety?

The problem can start after a period of separation where the dog has been in kennels and then returns to the house. Dogs are also more likely to show separation anxiety when their owner returns to work after a long period at home, eg after maternity leave or the school summer holidays. The poor dog has been used to plenty of attention and company and all of a sudden he is alone in a quiet empty house.

What are the signs of separation anxiety?

This is usually a problem of young adult dogs. Most dogs with this problem start to become agitated when they sense that their owner is about to leave. They often follow their owner from room to room and show excessive attachment. Once the owner has left the trail of destruction begins... wetting and messing in the house is not uncommon, alongside barking and the destruction of household possessions. Some dogs vomit or have diarrhoea when left alone and others may harm themselves. When their owner returns many dogs are submissive and cringe amid the debris because they have previously been punished by a furious owner coming home to the mess.

How can I help my dog?

There is help at hand but you must be prepared to put a lot of time and effort into helping your dog overcome his fears. Never, never punish your dog if you come home to a mess - this will only make the problem worse. Your dog is destructive because he is so anxious about being left alone. If you punish him he learns to associate the combination of you and the mess with punishment. When you are gone he is left in the house alone and becomes destructive. Now he is alone with the mess and becomes more anxious because when you appear and there is mess he is punished. Basically, treatment is aimed at gradually getting your dog used to longer and longer periods alone. Your vet will be able to give you advice about managing the problem and, in particularly tricky cases, may recommend that you and your dog visit a specialist in dog behavioural problems. With personal advice and some effort most dogs improve over about 4 weeks and will be much better after a few months.

Can drugs stop my dog being anxious?

There are drugs that your vet can prescribe (which work a bit like prozac in people) to help your dog overcome his anxiety. Unfortunately these drugs are not a miracle cure but can make treatment with behavioural management work more quickly.

What else could I do?

Remember that the problem only arises when your dog is left alone. If you can avoid leaving him for long periods while you are in the early stages of treatment life will be much easier for everyone. If you have to

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go away think about getting a house sitter to look after your dog rather than putting him in kennels. If you can, try to arrange to take him to work with you for a while. These things will help to reduce your stress levels as well as your dog's!

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your dog please contact Orwell Veterinary Group on 01473 333677 and we will be happy to advise you.