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The respected WA dog behaviour consultant helps us understand our canine companions



Does leaving your dog at home alone break your heart?

WHEN left alone during their first nights in a new home, it's normal for puppies to experience distress and to vocalise that emotion through barking or whining. However, if the behaviour continues, there's a definite need to take action.

While mild separation cases are easier to resolve, serious ones may not be – meaning some dogs may ultimately benefit from anti-anxiety medication.

But medication isn't a "magic cure" and behaviour modification techniques are still needed.

Signs your dog may need help include:

When you're home they follow you everywhere (even to the toilet); they're constantly underfoot; they touch/lean on you; they're alert to your every move.

The way your dog behaves when you're away from home can vary, but may include excessive vocalisation, destructive chewing, digging, inappropriate urination and defecation, loss of appetite, trembling, excessive licking, self-mutilation, attempts to escape, aggression on your departure and overwhelming greetings on your return.

Common causes of separation anxiety include moving house, changes in your daily schedule (such as beginning full-time work

after spending long periods at home), family members moving out and the loss of a canine companion.

If your dog has a serious case of separation anxiety, the best option is to take time off work and retrain your pet, but in the real world this can be difficult to organise.

Either way, the strategies below should make staying home alone a happier experience for your dog.

*** Practice departures & arrivals** You don't want your dog to think departures and arrivals are major emotional events as this could contribute to increased anxiety, so ignore them for 15 to 30 minutes before you leave and after you return. If they attempt to get your attention, avoid looking at, touching or talking to them until they've settled. Start by being away for short periods, then slowly increase the time.

*** Change your behaviour** Unquestionably, your pet's a great source of affection, but to overindulge a dog with separation-related issues doesn't help them. Encourage independence by letting your dog outside for short periods when you're home. Make it a fun activity. Let your dog inside when they're quiet, don't make a fuss about it and ensure you tell them they're "good" when they're not being a "Velcro" dog. Remember to show self-control with your affection.

*** A tired dog's a good dog** Regularly walking your dog on a lead or engaging in more active exercise can really help ease anxiety because

it stimulates the production of the "feelgood" hormone, serotonin, so make it a priority if your dog's suffering from separation issues.

*** Mentally stimulate your dog** When you leave home, provide your dog with an "interesting" activity, preferably one they'll focus on with great concentration for a prolonged period of time. Moist treats are of greater interest to most dogs and it pays to bring out the "big guns" to lessen the blow of being left alone. Tuna, mince, chicken, etc, stuffed in a Kong toy are ideal. Dry biscuits scattered outside give your dog a mission that aims to remove the focus from you on to other activities.

*** Mix and match your departure cues** Identify things you usually do before leaving your house that trigger anxiousness or increased restlessness in your dog (i.e. picking up keys, putting on work shoes) and begin to mix these up. Do some of them, but don't actually leave. Jiggle your keys and simply put them down. Don't jiggle your keys and start the car. Walk to the door and come back again.

Bear in mind it's not your dog's fault they've become so dependent on you. Sometimes we inadvertently shape their behaviour. They're experiencing a great deal of stress and need your help, so be consistent and patient and, in time, both you and your dog will be in a better head space when they're home alone.

* www.kathysdogtraining.com.au

* Watch Kathy helping with dog behaviour on *Can We Help?* on Friday at 6.30pm on ABC1.

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