

# **Separation Anxiety**

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Many of us have known or experienced dogs who 'hate to be left alone'.

Symptoms usually manifest themselves in barking and howling, destructive chewing - from personal possessions to furniture and even woodwork - and toileting. It is easy for us as, dog owners to put a human spin on this behavior and to assume it occurs because the dog feels lonely, afraid, anxious, helpless or even angry. The reality is however that this behaviour is not rooted in the dog's need for our protection but in the dog's need to protect us.

As pack animals, domestic dogs instinctively understand that our family is a pack and that this pack requires leaders in order to keep it safe. If our dogs cannot see in us behaviour they instinctively recognise as leadership then they will take the job on themselves. They will assume the responsibility of protecting us, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week – as a parent would protect a child.

When we talk about separation, we mean any scenario where the dog can neither see us nor physically reach us - and so it can occur whilst we are still in the house - this is particularly common overnight.

In his excellent document 'Trouble on the Walk' Shane Michael Tyler drew an analogy between the responsibilities of a dog on a walk - if it perceives itself to be pack leader - and the responsibilities of a parent out with a child in a big city. I liked the analogy so much i have borrowed it.....

If you have ever been separated from your child in a public place you will remember vividly the stomach-churning dread, the all-consuming fear and anxiety, the panic that you felt. If you haven't then imagine how that would feel!

How would you handle this situation? You would call out to your child, you would look for them, you would contact authority figures, somebody with a public address system. Anything that might bring your child back to you. Your dog doesn't have these options. They're shut in and they can't look for you. Instead they do all they can to help you find your way safely home. So they may bark and howl - in the hope their voices will carry far enough to lead you home. Or they toilet - in the hope that their scent will carry far enough to guide you home..

How would you handle the anxiety? Smoking, biting nails, chewing gum - anything to help alleviate the symptoms of stress. Your dog will respond in a similar way. Chewing releases endorphins which help calm them and in desperation they may chew anything - cupboard doors, tables, chairs, skirting boards even. The greater the anxiety, the more

destructive the results. Some dogs may take your personal possessions because they carry your scent and the dog can take comfort in this.

In order to fully address Separation Anxiety, you need to address your dog's leadership issues and for this we recommend a 1 to 1 with one of our consultants to implement a long term solution.

David Cole – Highly Recommended Canine Behaviour Consultant



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