

METROPOLITAN VETERINARY ASSOCIATES NEWSLETTER

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SEPARATION ANXIETY

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INTRODUCTION

Separation anxiety is a disorder characterized by clinical signs that are only observed in the owner's absence or perceived absence. Alternative terminology used to describe this condition includes separation-related behavior, separation-related problems, separation-related distress, and separation-related disorders. While behaviors that occur in the owner's absence are often attributed to anxiety, there may be other motivations such as barrier frustration, boredom, noise fear, or other environmental triggers. New research categorizes separation-related problems into distinct subgroups including exit frustration, redirected reactive, reactive inhibited, and boredom (De Assis, 2020).

Separation anxiety is a common problem in our veterinary patients and can significantly impact the human-animal bond. Canine separation anxiety is present in 14-17% (10.7 million) of households and represents 20-40% of cases that present to behavior specialty clinics in North America (Sherman and Mills, 2008; Simpson, 2000). One study showed that separation-related behavior was reported by 50% of dog owners but only 13% of the affected dogs' owners sought any form of professional help (Bradshaw et al., 2002). The prevalence

of separation anxiety in cats is unknown but this condition can also affect our feline patients.

Risk factors for dogs to develop separation anxiety include genetic predisposition, long periods of being left alone or never being left alone as a puppy, moving into a new home or urban environment, change in routine, excessive greetings or prolonged departures by the owner, and single adult owners. Spoiling activities, such as allowing the dog on the bed or feeding table scraps, are not associated with development of separation anxiety.

CLINICAL SIGNS

Dogs may begin to show signs of separation anxiety while the owner is preparing to leave. Pre-departure cues (items or actions that indicate that the owner is leaving) can trigger the stress response in the dog. Owners may notice their dog panting, pacing, and following them while they prepare to leave. Owners often note that their dog looks "sad" which is often indicative of signs of stress (e.g. lowered head, cowering, ears back, monitoring).

Once the owner departs, there is a broad range of potential clinical signs that dogs display and each can range from mild to severe. These signs include vocalization (howling, barking,



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whining), inactivity, restlessness, destructive behavior (chewing, digging, scratching), elimination, self-trauma (licking, chewing, clawing, biting), anorexia, diarrhea, vomiting, and hypersalivation. The clinical signs that are often noted first are those that are harmful to the human-animal bond such as destruction, elimination, or a neighbor complaint of vocalization. When the owner returns home, the dog may exhibit excessive greeting rituals lasting over 10 minutes including vocalization, jumping, pacing, inability to settle, or attempts to play.

Cats with separation anxiety display one or more of the following behaviors

when home alone: inappropriate urination or defecation, vomiting, excessive vocalization, destruction, psychogenic grooming, decreased appetite, and decreased activity level.

It is important for owners to understand that their pets are not exhibiting destruction and elimination “out of spite” and that they are not experiencing “guilt” upon the owner’s arrival home. Pets are not capable of planning to upset their owners in the future but rather their behavior is a result of panicking when home alone. What owners interpret as guilt is actually a dog expressing fear (e.g. cowering, hiding, tail tucked, avoiding the owner) in response to their owner’s reaction. This is usually due to a history of punishment from previous incidents when the owner returned home. There are cases of multiple dogs in a household in which one dog eliminates when the owners are not home but the other dog cowers and hides during the owner’s return because they were previously punished themselves. It can even worsen to a point where the dog hides when the owner comes home despite no damage or elimination being present due to anticipation of punishment. Therefore, it is recommended that the owners do not punish their pets verbally or physically when discovering evidence of separation anxiety as it will further increase their anxiety.

DIAGNOSIS

The most common reason owners suspect their pet has separation anxiety is through evidence of destruction, elimination, or a neighbor complaint about vocalization when the pet is home alone. As veterinarians, we should collect behavior histories to screen for separation anxiety and inquire about the pet’s behavior during the owner’s departures and returns. However, the gold standard for diagnosing separation anxiety is to video record the pet’s behavior when they are home alone. Video is the only way to accurately diagnose separation anxiety and rule out other differentials such as boredom, barrier frustration, noise fear, etc. There are a variety of tools to video record a pet’s behavior

including apps, affordable cameras, and baby monitors. The ideal device has the options to watch the video live, playback the video, download the video to send for feedback, and one that records audio to help rule out potential auditory triggers (e.g. neighbors coming home, mailman approaching the door).

Other diagnoses that must be considered when a dog presents for separation anxiety include hyperattachment, noise or thunderstorm phobia, and confinement anxiety. Hyperattachment presents as a dog that is following their owner from room-to-room when they are home. This can exacerbate the dog’s separation anxiety but is not sufficient for a diagnosis of separation anxiety on its own. In addition, a report showed that 40% of dogs with a noise phobia also had separation anxiety

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and 8% of dogs with separation anxiety had thunderstorm phobia (Overall, 1998). This can be a result of the dog experiencing the stressful event (e.g. storm) when home alone and associating it with the owner’s absence. Lastly, dogs with confinement anxiety display signs of stress when in small spaces (e.g. crate, behind a baby gate, confined in a room). If a dog with confinement anxiety is confined while home alone, this may exacerbate their separation anxiety. See the table on “Behavioral Rule Outs” for other considerations.

With the development of any behavior concern, potential medical causes should be investigated with a minimum database and a thorough pain assessment. See table “Medical Rule Outs” for medical differential diagnoses.

TREATMENT

Owner Education

It has been shown that owners are more compliant when given less than 5 recommendations for separation anxiety. For any behavior concern, including separation anxiety, it is important to educate owners on reading their pet’s body language and providing relevant details. This can help determine the severity of the problem and success of treatment. For example, if the owner describes the dog as “panicking” when home alone, this can vary from pacing for 5 minutes to chewing through doors for 3 hours. Therefore, details will be crucial. In addition, as mentioned earlier, educating owners that “guilt” and “spite” are not emotions that their pets are experiencing, but rather that their pets are essentially experiencing panic attacks, will help them empathize with their pets and follow recommendations.

Environmental management and behavior modification

As mentioned above, when the dog is left home alone, their behavior should be video recorded to determine potential triggers and progress during the treatment plan. Along with video, a log should be kept documenting the date, behavior observed, duration, potential triggers, etc.

In an ideal situation, the owner would never leave the pet home alone during the initial treatment plan to avoid sensitization to departures. This can be accomplished with daycare, pet sitters, family, friends, or neighbors watching them at home. This is not always possible, such as in cases of dogs with aggression towards people or dogs, but should be recommended otherwise.

The owners should set up a safe place for the pet within the home. This can be a crate, exercise pen, baby gate, specific room, or a dog bed. When the owner is home, they should encourage the pet to use it by offering toys and treats in this location. Ideally, the pet would feel safe here so when they are home alone, they have a refuge to go to. A relaxation protocol may be recommended to help them learn to settle in that spot. If the dog has

CHARTS/TABLES

Owner Education

CLINICAL SIGNS	BEHAVIORAL DIFFERENTIAL
Destructive Behaviors	Play behavior, puppy chewing, thunderstorm or noise phobia, territorial aggression, boredom (overactivity due to inadequate exercise), cognitive dysfunction
Inappropriate urination/defecation	Inadequate housetraining, inadequate opportunity, urine marking, fear-induced, excitement urination, cognitive dysfunction
Excessive vocalization	Territorial behavior, social communication, play, thunderstorm or noise phobia
Self-trauma	Canine compulsive disorder, play

Medical Rule Outs

CLINICAL SIGNS	MEDICAL DIFFERENTIAL
Destructive behaviors, excessive vocalization	Hepatic encephalopathy
Inappropriate urination/defecation	Cystitis, endocrine disorders (diabetes mellitus, Cushing's), neoplastic disorders, seizures, GI disease (parasites, colitis)
Hypersalivation	Toxin exposure
Self-trauma	Hepatic encephalopathy, dermatologic (acral lick, allergic, parasitic), neurologic (neuritis), orthopedic (degenerative joint disease)

confinement anxiety, then this must be taken into account when choosing a safe place. If a dog attempts to escape from crates, crating should be avoided as dogs may fracture their teeth or jaws attempting to escape. While a heavy duty crate may stop the dog from escaping, they can still harm themselves during attempts and their anxiety can worsen. If a dog must be crated for safety reasons, such as to prevent destruction of doors and walls, then medication to help facilitate relaxation is indicated.

The environment should also be set up to be quiet and calm. If there are noises that trigger the separation anxiety, the owners should play background noise when they leave such as Through A Dog's Ear, audiobooks, or a white noise machine. If there are visual triggers for the pet, then blinds or contact paper should be placed on windows.

Prior to departures, the owners should physically or mentally exercise the dog to help expend energy. Their departure routine should be short and the owner should say a quick goodbye. To provide a distraction during departures as well as countercondition to departures, a

food puzzle should be offered. This food puzzle should be rotated and given at other times to prevent it from becoming a pre-departure cue.

Upon returning home, the owners should encourage their pets to focus on an activity such as a game of fetch, going into the yard, or going for a walk. The pet will have energy pent up and it's best to provide them with an alternative outlet for it. Owners should avoid short returns, such as coming home after work and then going back out for an errand.

To actively work on reducing the pet's anxiety when home alone, the owners can perform relaxation exercises, uncouple departure cues, and practice graduated departures. Each of these exercises should be performed under the supervision of a veterinarian or certified force free trainer as there is a risk of further sensitizing the pet to departures if performed incorrectly.

The owner should never punish their pet for elimination, destruction, or other behaviors associated with separation anxiety. This may worsen the separation anxiety as well as the human-animal bond.

SPECIALIZED SERVICES

BEHAVIOR

Hagar Hauser, DVM
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Obtaining a second pet

Owners often inquire about obtaining a second pet to keep the original pet company when home alone. However, this has not been shown to reduce separation anxiety and in fact, the second dog may develop separation anxiety themselves due to the stress exhibited by the original pet. The other concern is that the newly adopted dog will have other behavior concerns the owner may have to manage.

Psychopharmaceuticals

There are two FDA-approved foundation medications for the treatment of separation anxiety in conjunction with behavior modification in dogs: Reconcile® (fluoxetine) and Clomicalm® (clomipramine). Since it can take 4-6 weeks for clinical effect, we can bridge with a fast-acting medication such as trazodone, gabapentin, or clonidine. The owner should trial the selected fast-acting medication when home to observe their pet's response to the medication. In addition, this fast-acting medication can be given approximately two hours prior to departures long-term along with the foundation medication.

PROGNOSIS

Dogs respond well to medications but have a better prognosis if the medications are used in combination with behavior modification. Ongoing destruction, vocalization, and elimination can place a strain on the human-animal bond so it is important to address separation anxiety as soon as possible. It's also important to note that worsening can occur with life changes or stressful events such as moving, introducing a baby into the home, fireworks, etc. Owners should therefore prepare for these life changes by consulting with their veterinarian about appropriate medications and a behavior treatment plan ahead of time. 🐾

BEHAVIOR VIRTUAL LUNCH AND LEARN

Schedule a virtual lunch and learn for your clinical team with the newest addition to our behavior service, Dr. Hagar Hauser. Possible topics of discussion below:

- Triaging a behavior case
- How to pick a trainer for your clients
- Psychopharmaceuticals 101
- Low stress veterinary visits
- Cooperative care
- Feel free to suggest a topic best suited to your hospital!

Lunch will be delivered to your hospital to enjoy during the meet and greet. To schedule, call Sarah Spurgeon at **610-666-1050** or email sspurgeon@metro-vet.com.

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