



# TREATING CANINE SEPARATION ANXIETY

## ***UNDERSTANDING CANINE SEPARATION ANXIETY:***

CSA problems represent forms of social and place hyper-attachments. Separation distress is found naturally in many canid species, especially the more social species like domestic dogs. Distress behaviors are beneficial to canine pups. These behaviors exist to prevent the pup from wandering too far from the family unit, and to assist the mother in locating her pup. The anxiety experienced encourages the pup to stay close to the pack. An important purpose of separation anxiety is the importance of close contact and bonding between the family unit or pack. Separation anxiety has not been witnessed in species that do not raise their young. Most of this behavior is instinctive to puppies, but learning soon plays an important role. The relief and comfort of social contact reinforces the distress behaviors that the puppy displays (pup feels anxious, pup whines for mom, mom comes back, pup feels better). With domestic dogs, most puppies are removed from their mom and litter at an extremely early age. The pup is neither biologically nor psychologically ready to be on his own. This transition is usually harsh and abrupt instead of smooth and gradual. In the pup's new home he spends a lot of time by himself. He is crated or confined during the day when his owners are at work; and is crated, usually in a separate room, at night. Over the next few days the pup is traumatized by the lack of familiarity and isolation from the new pack (the family). This isolation provokes anxiety and the pup vocalizes continuously for his person to return. Vocalizing does not make the person come back and the puppy starts to feel that he cannot control or predict his environment. This is the making of a neurotic animal. Many owners want to yell at or punish the puppy for the excessive vocalization. This can make the problem worse by increasing the pup's need for social contact.

## ***RISK FACTORS:***

There are certain aspects of a dog's history that may make him more susceptible to developing canine separation anxiety. The following are considered risk factors:

- Punitive rearing practices
- Dogs that are re-homed or adopted from an animal shelter
- Dogs kenneled frequently for long periods of time
- Sudden change in routine from lots of time spent with owner to very little time with owner
- Significant change in daily routine or schedule
- Moving to a new home (with owner)
- Dogs who show acute awareness to owner's every move
- Preexisting anxiety-based disorders (depression, phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder)
- Any traumatic event experienced by dog when he was alone

- Emotionally traumatic experience of any kind
- Early or late placement from mother and littermates
- Being left alone at a young age
- Failure to gradually expose pup to absences
- Long term or permanent absence of a family member
- Addition of a new family member
- Social isolation in general within first 4 months of life
- Cognitive dysfunction (geriatric disorder)
- Breeds that were bred to work closely and eagerly with their handler

*If a puppy or dog is coddled a lot and prevented from learning independence, a hyper-normal social attachment may develop.*

### ***SIGNS OF CANINE SEPARATION ANXIETY:***

- Excessive distress vocalization (barking, whining)
- Scratching or digging at furniture, the door, window frames, etc.
- Frantic pacing
- Frantic visual scanning
- Inappropriate chewing
- Increased frequency of urination/defecation
- Drooling, usually at door, window, or crate
- Wet footprints from sweaty paws
- Highly exaggerated greeting routine that appears frantic, excited, happy, or submissive
- Aggression

### ***EXPRESSION OF DISTRESS OR ANXIETY:***

Your dog will typically anticipate the isolation from the associated cues in the environment. The dog learns these cues from the owner's pre-departure routine. The anxiety begins with the initial cue and steadily grows until the owner actually leaves the house. The dog cannot control the situation so his frustration level rises. The distress grows steadily and peaks usually within the 30 minutes from the owner's departure. From there the anxiety level slowly declines at a variable rate. As a dog slowly recovers any stimuli may re-sensitize him. This could be another dog barking, a car driving by, or a delivery man coming to the door.

### ***THE NERVOUS SYSTEM:***

The nervous system is responsible for behavior. The nervous system is divided into two sections: the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) and the peripheral nervous system (nerves and some sensory organs). The nervous system works closely with the endocrine system, which is responsible for chemical coordination in the body. The nervous system conveys information from one place to another by neurons or nerve cells. Chemical secretions called neurotransmitters travel from one cell to another. They contain and convey information. Neurotransmitters are created from precursors. Once the neurotransmitter has finished its job it will either be taken into the cell (re-uptake) or destroyed.

Some of the more important neurotransmitters are Dopamine, Norepinephrine and Serotonin.

**Dopamine** is involved in motor coordination and reaction time. A deficiency in this can cause an inability to learn, irritability, anxiety and a decline in endorphins (dog's natural pain killer). Dopamine influences the brain's pleasure center and a decline in this neurotransmitter can result in a diminished positive feeling.

**Norepinephrine** is related to adrenaline. It is responsible for your dog's energy level. A depletion of this can cause your dog to shut down and display signs of lethargy and depression.

**Serotonin** regulates mood, pain and arousal levels. Low levels of serotonin can result in aggression, impaired learning, anxiety and obsessive behavior.

When a dog becomes overstressed the nervous system releases Norepinephrine and Dopamine, which causes a suspension of the part of the brain responsible for learning and higher thought process, previous learning, impulse control and social inhibition. Previously learned coping mechanisms may become inaccessible which can provoke species-typical coping mechanisms (chewing, digging, urinating/defecating, vocalizing).

### ***TREATING CANINE SEPARATION ANXIETY:***

*Treatment for separation anxiety should be flexible and geared to fit your individual dog's needs.*

#### **Pharmacological Intervention:**

A major contribution to the treatment of C.S.A. is a drug called *Clomicalm*, the brand name for a drug containing Clomipramine Hydrochloride. Clomicalm blocks the re-uptake of serotonin by the neurons, thus increasing the serotonin levels in the brain. Increased serotonin levels decrease the level of fear, stress and anxiety experienced by the dog.

#### **Nutritional Intervention:**

Stress puts greater nutritional demands on your dog. If your dog is not currently eating a high quality dog food then you will need to slowly change his diet. Lower quality dog foods frequently contain a large quantity of corn which is thought to decrease the level of serotonin in the brain. Dietary tryptophan helps to make serotonin in the brain. Diets high in protein tend to deplete tryptophan levels, thereby decreasing serotonin levels. Diets high in carbohydrates actually increase available tryptophan. Innova and Nutrience are examples of some high quality dog foods. You should take ten days to switch to a high quality food. Try to focus on rice, potato or barley as a carbohydrate source instead of corn. Start with 90% of the old diet and 10% of the new diet. Increase the percentage of the new diet each day until your dog is switched over.

#### **Mental Stimulation:**

By encouraging your dog to participate in active, focused enjoyment of something, you can help your dog to avoid many problematic emotions. You can increase mental stimulation in your dog by feeding part of his meal in a buster cube, hide portions of his meal around the house when you leave, training (obedience/sports) and visiting new places.

#### **Physical Stimulation:**

*A tired dog is a well behaved dog!* Exercise stimulates the production of serotonin and is a way for your dog to release all of his energy appropriately. When you start exercising your dog start out slow and increase the amount of time and the level of the exercise. It is a good idea to have your dog examined by a veterinarian first

to make sure there are no issues that may have an impact on your exercise program such as obesity, arthritis, hip dysplasia, etc.

### **To Crate or Not to Crate:**

For some dogs with minor cases of C.S.A. the crate may cause a calming effect. For the majority of dogs with separation anxiety, a crate only intensifies the dog's stress and panic. These dogs may injure themselves in an attempt to escape from the crate. As a general rule it is not a good idea to crate a dog with C.S.A.

### **Second Dog Syndrome:**

Dogs are social animals and are happiest when in the presence of other members of their species. Many people believe that getting another dog will treat the current dog's separation anxiety. In most separation anxiety cases the dog has developed a hyper-attachment to humans, so another dog won't make a difference. In reality, adding another dog to this situation is likely to increase the stress on your current dog.

### **Scent Item:**

Providing your dog with a soft item that smells like the attachment object or person can be beneficial. The best way to accomplish this is by wearing a t-shirt to bed. When you get up the next morning offer the t-shirt to your dog. Use a new shirt every night so the shirt will always have your odor.

### **Soothing Noise:**

Play a radio during the day that is set to play soothing music. This can also help drown out exterior noises that may sensitize your dog.

### **Reduce Presence and Absence Contrast:**

For the first 15-20 minutes after you arrive home or before you leave completely ignore your dog. This means no eye contact, no speaking, and no fast, noisy activity. The goal is to reduce the contrast between your presence and absence. If there is damage in your house, ignore it!

### **Consistent Routine:**

Try to provide your dog with as strict a routine as possible. This includes feeding times, voiding times, play times, training times, etc. Consistency and structure are the keys to stability.

### **Identify Pre-departure Routines:**

Pre-departure routines are all of the things you do before you leave the house. This includes turning off the alarm, brushing your teeth, taking a shower, feeding the dog, taking out the trash, eating breakfast, picking up your keys, getting your purse, etc. Your dog has learned that these things predict your departure and may begin to show anxious behavior when you perform one of these behaviors. We need to change the prediction or anticipated bad experience. We can do this by systematic desensitization and counter conditioning. Systematic desensitization is designed to increase tolerance to the stimuli in question. It involves exposing your dog to the stimulus in question at a low enough intensity that no sensitized response occurs, then gradually increasing exposure at a pace which does not produce a sensitized response. Counter conditioning is when, with your encouragement, your dog learns to replace an undesirable behavior with a more appropriate one. In order to encourage your dog to not become sensitized by these pre-departure cues you must expose the dog to manageable portions and repeat the exposure frequently. You are trying to increase the predictability of these

cues being associated with NOT leaving. Make a list of all of your pre-departure cues. Determine which cue encourages an anxiety response from your dog and work on the cue before that. Once your dog is showing no sensitization to that cue move to the next, and so on. Eventually you will reach the point where it is time to leave. You want to move very slowly. Go out for 1 second, turn around and come back in. When your dog is fine with that, move to 2 seconds, and so on. Eventually you will vary your schedule so that you leave for 2 seconds, then 5, then 1, then 3, then 2, then 6, then 6, etc. Just mix it up. When your dog is showing no sensitization to a departure of 30-45 minutes then you may want to meet with your veterinarian to discuss adjusting the dosage of medication.

Remember, this is not your dog's fault and he is not acting this way to get back at you. He is just a sweet creature that we have bred to be more dependent on us. This process takes time, so be patient.

**For more information on treating separation anxiety, contact our behavior specialists at 713-869-7722, ext. 187, or email [animals@hspca.org](mailto:animals@hspca.org).**