

Separation Anxiety, but what can you do to help your dog feel a little less stressed?

During the pandemic we all became used to being at home together. Eventually we returned to our busy lives again but what about our pets? They probably found it hard to understand why they had been abandoned at home. Separation related behaviours (SRBs) are one of the most common problems for dog owners since the end of the lockdowns.

What do we mean by SRBs? The most common term 'Separation Anxiety' describes when a dog becomes anxious and distressed when they are left alone. They may show obvious distress such as barking, howling, toileting or becoming destructive. But sometimes we never really know that our dogs are suffering as signs can be silent (pacing, salivating, watching at windows). It may only be when a neighbour complains of the noise, or we come back to find our new sofa is shredded that we find out.



So, is it my fault? The answer is usually a resounding 'No'. There are many reasons why a dog has SRBs. They may have always hated being alone, or it may suddenly appear. It can be hard to find the root causes but some common factors are;

- change in work pattern or going back to work after being at home for a long time (e.g. lockdown)
- moving home or change in the household (e.g. baby, teenagers leaving for university, death)
- being rehomed or after a period in kennels
- after a period of illness (dog or human) or a traumatic event
- never learning to be alone when they arrived
- some dogs are genetically more prone to developing SRBs

What can I do? It is rare for dogs just to 'get over' the panic they feel. The best way to help is by getting help from a behaviourist, preferably someone who understands and specialises in SRBs.

Is there anything I could do myself? If you're not ready to seek professional help there are some simple changes that owners can make.

- Try not to leave the dog alone as each time they become more panic stricken and their fear can escalate.
- Try pet services (day care, walkers or sitters) or friends and neighbours may be able to help out or perhaps the dog can come to work with you?
- Crates rarely help SRBs. The dog may love sleeping in their crate or spend time in there when you are at home, but being confined in a crate when alone can add stress by making them feel trapped and sometimes self-injure when trying to escape.
- Exercise, mental stimulation and training is great but won't help them to be happy about being alone.
- DO NOT punish the dog. Reprimanding the dog will just add to the problem. All that happens is the dog becomes afraid to vocalise but the panic doesn't disappear and, in all likelihood, will get worse.



The best way to prevent SRBs is to train the dog to be alone when they are still a puppy. Leaving them alone for a few seconds in another room with the door shut and gradually building up time, just a few seconds, then a few minutes, until they are comfortable for say 30-60 minutes can help you and your dog to avoid separation related behaviours.

HELP is ONE PHONE CALL AWAY