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Are Dogs With Separation Anxiety Overly Attached To Their Owners?

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Separation anxiety is a common behavior problem in dogs and is occasionally seen in cats as well. Separation anxiety is a fearful reaction to being separated from another individual, usually a person, but it can be another animal. The most common complaints by owners who have dogs with this problem are that their dogs are destructive, house soil and/or bark and howl when the dog is left alone. Dogs with separation anxiety may show other symptoms such as excessive salivation, trembling, hyperventilating, pacing, escape from the house or yard, depression and rarely, aggression directed at people when they try to leave the dog alone.

It has long been assumed that separation anxiety is caused by an attachment problem between the animal and person. The reason is that separation anxiety in dogs looks very similar in its symptoms and the circumstances to separation anxiety experienced by human children. What goes wrong with the attachment that leads to separation anxiety in dogs is unknown. Some have argued that separation anxiety is due to a hyper-attachment of the dog to the person. In support of this hypothesis is that observation that many of these dogs follow their owners around and are reluctant to let them out of their sight. Someone once referred to these dogs as “Velcro® dogs.”

But is it truly an over-attachment problem or something else that has gone wrong with the relationship? A recent study by Parthasarathy and Crowell-Davis compared dogs with separation anxiety and those without in a standardized attachment test and when at home but separated from their owners. The attachment test looked at the behavior of the dog when the owner comes and goes from an unfamiliar room and when strangers come and go from the room. It’s a test that has proved valuable in studying attachments in children and their parents.

In the study of dogs and their owners, Parthasarathy and Crowell-Davis found no differences between dogs with separation anxiety and those without the problem, either in the attachment test or in their behavior after the owners were gone from home. It’s always difficult to interpret studies that find no differences between conditions, but the data suggest that the problem may not be an over-attachment problem. The separation anxiety dogs showed no more hyper attachment than did the normal dogs. They didn’t

spend any more time near their owners in the strange room, and didn't show distress behaviors when the owners left the room. When observed home alone they showed no more time near the door the owner left from than dogs without separation anxiety.

The reason that this is important to know whether separation anxiety is an over-attachment problem or an inappropriate attachment is that it can influence the way the problem is treated. Some have argued that if it is a hyper-attachment problem, then weakening the bond between dog and person will help fix the problem. So it has been recommended that owners ignore their dogs for long periods of time and that other people take care of the dog. Our experience with clients that follow this advice is that it just makes the problem worse. Having the owners ignore the anxious dog seems to make them even more anxious. This would make sense if the problem isn't due to over-attachment but some basic problem with the attachment.

The usual treatment for separation anxiety involves medications to reduce the dog's immediate anxiety coupled with behavior modification to change the dog's emotional reaction to being separated from his people. This is a gradual process that usually takes several weeks or longer. When the owners are home they are instructed to work on having the dog become more comfortable out of their sight but not to ignore the dog.

How we conceptualize a behavior problem and what we think causes it can greatly influence how we try to resolve it. The more we learn about separation anxiety, the better able we will be to resolve it and to prevent it.

References

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