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SEPARATION ANXIETY IN DOGS

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What is it? – Pets acting anxious, destructively or vocalizing when away from their people.

Examples – Your dog chews up the rug and urinates in your house whenever you go to work. The neighbors complain your dog cries constantly whenever you have to run an errand. Your dog looks on the verge of a panic attack when you get ready to leave for the day.

What causes it? - This is a mix of dog brain chemistry and life experiences. If your dog is too tightly bonded to you without enough independence skills, then your dog is at risk. This is why it is vital for puppies to learn to have “alone” time. It is also why every dog needs to be able to settle and not be touching a body part of ours the entire time we are home. Dogs that were rescued and then hyper-loved-on by new families are at risk. Certain high-strung dog breeds are also more prone to issues. Dogs that have a major change such as two parents at home and children all day long to everyone going back to work or school are at risk. (Does this sound familiar?)

Should I feel Guilty? Is is hard that loving our dogs too much can make them depend on us like we are a drug to them. When I was pregnant with my first child, I created a codependent separation-anxiety-filled dog in my own household. I am a vet and “know” better. I spent entirely too much time snuggling with him on the couch and not enough time letting him be a dog. As the human, I should determine when it is love time and when it is work time. So, if you feel guilty – I am here to tell you that you are not alone.

Why do I care – With COVID, I am home all the time. One day you may go back to the office. Eventually, there may be a new routine, or a child in your life that necessitates your dog being able to survive periods of time on his own. It is much easier for this to always be a part of his life rather than a rude shock one day.

My dog is already overly needy – what do I do?

- Teach a Settle Command. This means “go to bed and stay there” until I release you. Your dog should be OK sitting or sleeping on her bed at your command while you work or cook or watch TV. Practice this every day with the end goal of one hour a day in dog nap zone. You may need to start with 10 seconds.
- Start a nothing for free program. Do not let your dog dictate when the attention nozzle flows freely from you. They should always do a trick or other command prior to attention being delivered. This helps them build confidence and lets you titrate out the attention. Dogs that constantly hit your hand for you to rub them NEED this lesson.
- Desensitize your pet to you leaving the house. Gather keys, purse, open the garage door, and then DO NOTHING. Sit back down. Repeat frequently until your dog stops getting super stressed by the actions.
- No leaving drama or returning drama. DO NOT kiss your dog like it is the last time you will ever see her prior to leaving. And then don't just overwhelm him or her when you get home. It is better to have a quiet goodbye and IGNORE them for a few minutes after you return. They have waited hours to go potty - they can wait another five minutes while you ignore them. This reduces the hot / cold experiences for them of you being there versus being gone from home.
- Ask your veterinarian for other tips and medications in extreme cases. Know there isn't a magic pill and you will not get out of the need to train if these problems are in your household! 