

Separation Anxiety

By Michelle Posage, DVM



One of the best parts of my day is coming home to my bouncing Boxer dogs. Sometimes my husband will meet me by the door with a kiss, but I can always count on the dogs to be overcome with joy as soon as they hear my car pull into the driveway. It doesn't matter if they were gnawing a new bone or enjoying a nap. They come running with happy eyes and wagging bottoms. The youngest one will become so excited that her body curls into the shape of a "C".

There was a time, however, when it wasn't so much fun to come home. Mia, our older dog, came into our lives from a rescue group six years ago. She was in bad shape mentally and physically, but the biggest problem was her behavior when left alone.

Mia was destructive and vocal—disturbing neighbors, bending the metal bars of her crate and chewing door knobs free from their accustomed position on the door. More than once, I came home to a note from a concerned neighbor on one side of the front door and a telltale puddle of urine on the other. Days like those were almost as stressful for us as they were for her.

When she was left alone Mia had all the hallmark symptoms of separation anxiety: destruction, excessive vocalization, and inappropriate elimination. She would drool and tremble as soon as she saw that we were leaving. But with careful management, training and anti-anxiety medication, Mia got better. These days she waits impatiently for me to leave so she can sneak up on the bed for a comfortable nap on my bed pillow.

It isn't clear if dogs like Mia have separation anxiety before they are given up or if they develop it after having been abandoned by their family, but not all dogs with this problem have a history of abandonment. Separation anxiety can occur at any age in any breed. It can be triggered by a fearful experience when left alone or a change in routine. Moving, changing schedules, or the loss of a family member can all contribute to an existing anxiety problem.

Here are a few important things to keep in mind if you have a dog that suffers from separation anxiety:

- Separation anxiety is panic disorder that often gets worse over time.
- Punishment does not work and can create more anxiety.
- Confinement to a small room or a dog crate does not always stop destructive behavior, and usually increases anxiety.
- Dogs with moderate or severe separation anxiety may require anti-anxiety medication in combination with behavior modification.

As pet behavior problems go, separation anxiety is often rewarding to treat. Both dog and owner stand to benefit from solving this problem. Happiness is being free to leave the house, even for an unnecessary outing, and knowing that your dog will be well rested and your house intact when you return.

Dr. Michelle Posage is a veterinary behaviorist at the Animal Medical Center of New England, a specialty and emergency animal hospital. For more information or to schedule a personal consultation with Dr. Posage call 603.821.7222 or go to www.amcne.com.