



Behavior and Training Department Behavior Resources

Anxiety in Dogs

There are various kinds of anxiety in dogs - the most common is separation anxiety, followed by fear of strange objects, people or animals. Some of the symptoms include, but are not limited to: barking, digging, chewing, following the owner from room to room, excessive touching or licking, "dry" panting, whining, sweating from paws, soiling, sudden hair loss, self-mutilation, destructiveness, defensive growling and occasional aggression.

The cause of anxiety is usually quite simple - the dog's needs are not being met properly, or were not met during the dog's developmental periods.

Dogs belong in a pack (or family). They need structure, limits, and clear rules to be set by their leader. If the leadership - and companionship - of the pack is not adequate, or not available, the dog will respond in ways that are definitely anxiety producing in humans!

Most problems of anxiety can be solved - or at least helped - by strong leadership from you, the owner (and leader of their pack), and a solid routine they can count on. However, the dog must learn to accept the routine — and that can take time. The following are some guidelines for the owner of an anxious dog.

1. First, make sure the dog understands what you want and looks to you for leadership. Take him to class, or teach him obedience work at home. Make sure he gets enough exercise and stimulation. Ball playing in the back yard is good...but a morning and evening run is better.
2. Be aware how much he approaches you for attention and petting. If it's a great deal, stop petting him every time he demands it. Ignore him, turn away. When he relaxes, you can call him and pet him — at your discretion. This builds up your status in your pack, and helps him to trust your decisions.
3. If the dog goes from human to human in his search for attention, develop a signal that tells all the family members that the dog is on a doggy time-out. If necessary, set up a tie-down (a 3-4 foot leash attached to an immovable object) to prevent interactions, but use it AFTER the signal begins.
4. If the dog follows you from room to room, desensitize him to your departure. Go from room to room, and leave the dog behind you, shutting the door after you. You can tell him you are leaving him. When you return to the room, there should be no verbal warning and no greeting. Be very matter of fact, very cool.
5. Leave the house for short periods of time (beginning at two minutes), and return... again, no fanfare; cool, non-emotional departures, warm, calm arrivals. Gradually increase the amount of time you are away. If appropriate, leave the dog with something delicious that he can work on for some time. A "Kong" rubber toy, with peanut butter or cream cheese stuffed up the middle is a nice treat that takes some time to work on. Take it away when you return. This gives him something to look forward to.
6. If the dog is shy or sensitive, encourage independence by teaching games — find it, hide and seek, and agility. Play limited tug of war; that is, keep the excitement level moderate.
7. Never apologize to the dog for leaving - say good-bye lightly. Upon your return, act as though you've never been away. Putter around the house for a couple of minutes before greeting your dog. In essence, act as though nothing you do is unusual or noteworthy. That will lower the dog's anxiety level...and make both of you happier.

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