

No! Don't Leave Me!

Dogs are pack animals. That means they are social animals who thrive in environments where they interact with others. Not many species on earth will consider another species to be a part of their family group, but dogs and cats are two exceptions.

So, you're part of a pack. As a pack member, you have some responsibilities. The pack is very much "One for All and All for One!" Privately, you might squabble for that last bone, but publicly you are a united front. You know that Mom isn't approachable until she's had her coffee in the morning, and if Dad gets McDonalds on his way home, most of the fries will be gone. You know that there is safety in numbers and that leaving someone alone is a form of punishment.

Wait, you didn't know that? In the canine world, a dog without a pack is, well, in danger. The worst thing you can do to a dog is kick him out of the pack. Imagine if your family accidentally left you behind all alone in your huge house on Christmas while they took a vacation? How would you eat? How would you keep yourself safe? How would you survive??

Some dogs get something called separation anxiety. That's really a single term for a lot of different things of varying severity. It's an umbrella term for a dog that gets stressed, angry, or wild when left alone. If you think your dog has separation anxiety, don't despair. There are things that you, as a pack member, can do to help.

First, you need to determine if your dog really has separation anxiety. If you leave the house and your dog has free range of the house, your dog may just be bored. Shredded sofas, door jambs pulled off the wall and garbage strewn all over the kitchen indicates a wild time was had by all. Was it done vindictively? Maybe at first, but then it became so much fun that your heinous action of leaving was forgotten.

The cure for this kind of activity is teaching your dog to enjoy being in a crate. Or, by confining your party animal to a secure dog-proofed room. Additionally, giving your pup something productive to do will provide some fun and focus.

On the other side of the scale, you might come back to a home or crate filled with vomit, diarrhea, or other body fluids. Your dog might have barked for the entire time that you were gone, eaten their crate mat, or punched a hole in the crate door. This is extreme separation anxiety that can be caused by a number of different things. The fix is the same regardless of the cause. It includes some combination of medication, desensitization, patience, support, and training.

Separation anxiety also includes various degrees of anger, frustration, FOMO, and fear. Each dog is unique and each situation is different. You might not have taken the time to teach your dog that this is something normal and you're coming back. You might not have arranged for your dog to have a dog walker during the day to help prevent accidents. You might be expecting too much from a young dog or a rescue dog that may have had some trauma or PTSD.

Separation anxiety is something that can be overcome. It isn't a reason to relinquish your responsibility to your pack member. Remember, you're a family, and if your family member is having difficulty, you must help them.

Written by Sheila of Integral Dog Training in collaboration with Animal Rescue Konnection (c) 2022.