WOMEN'S ANIMAL CENTER
America's First Animal Shelter

Separation Anxiety

Dogs bond strongly to humans. They can learn to be alone for moderate periods but it doesn't come naturally. It's not surprising then that some dogs develop separation anxiety, a disorder consisting of panic attacks: urinating, defecating, frantic scratching and chewing to escape, barking and crying when the dog is left alone.

Separation anxiety may be triggered by a high contrast situation – months of the owner home all day followed by sudden eight-hour absences. Luckily, it responds to treatment. Dogs with separation anxiety are not misbehaving out of boredom, spite or for fun. Some dogs with separation anxiety are fine when left alone in the car or when the owner takes out the garbage – they've learned the difference between "long absence" pictures and "short absence" pictures. Others are anxious in all contexts.

Preventing Separation Anxiety

New dogs are at higher risk if they get constant attention the first few weeks. It is better to leave often for brief periods so the dog's early learning about departures is that they are no big deal and predict easy lengths of absence: "whenever she leaves, she comes back."
Give dogs both physical exercise and mental work to do. Problem solving is mentally fatiguing and so increases the likelihood that your dog will rest quietly when he is left alone. Play fetch, play hide and seek with his toys, teach him tricks, get involved in a sport like Agility, let him play with other dogs, stuff his food into Kongs. Soften the blow of your departures by providing extremely enticing stuffed toys for him to unpack.

The gold standard is systematic desensitization to change the dog's emotional reaction to departure. The track record for this technique is excellent, but you'll need a professional to design and coach you through the program.

A consultation with a veterinarian or veterinary behaviorist may also be recommended to see if anti-anxiety medications can be used in conjunction with the systematic desensitization.