

When leaving your dog alone is 'ruff'

BY CAROL CARIDAD



If leaving your dog alone turns your precious pet into a wild animal, you're not alone. Chances are your pet has separation anxiety.

As social animals, dogs naturally have the need to interact with others and belong to a

pack. The need for companionship can become a problem when a dog experiences the tremendous stress caused by isolation. This state of fear, which often gives way to behavioral issues, is called separation anxiety. Many owners become disheartened by their pet's misbehavior, but worry not! Separation anxiety is often curable and sometimes even preventable.

As the president of Paws 4 You, a local pet rescue organization, I am all too familiar with the canine separation anxiety issue. After having read many studies, speaking to several experts, and experiencing it first hand, I can say that even though the exact trigger of the disorder is unknown, experts pinpoint several situations that often lead to its development.

While all dogs are susceptible to separation anxiety, oftentimes these cases stem from rescued dogs that become fearful of isolation

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after multiple changes in environment. In essence, some rescued animals become fearful of being left again by their pack. Another frequent source of the disorder is when owners give their dogs (rescued or not) too much attention. Yes, that's right too much attention. From taking him/her to run errands with you to allowing them to sleep in your bed, some dogs become so dependent on their owner's company that they literally do not know how to cope with being alone. Separation anxiety can also be caused by a change of environment, including a move to a new house.

While experts are unsure of why some dogs develop separation anxiety and others do not, they agree that the disorder can be identified by a change in behavioral patterns. Common signs of separation anxiety include:

- Chewing on furniture.
- A house-broken dog relieving him/her self in the house.
- Excessive barking, scratching at walls or doors, pacing, and other destructive behaviors.

All of which, of course, occur when you

leave your pet at home alone.

However, just because your dog acts up when you leave does not mean that they have developed the disorder. In fact, Dr. Maria Oliveira, a local veterinarian, strongly suggests that owners have their pet examined to determine if they have separation anxiety.

"Some dogs will bark and cry for just a little when you leave and will do the same when they hear you returning," said Dr. Oliveira. "This is normal. Just like some kids do when they are left at a daycare and you think they have cried the whole day."

For dogs that do have the disorder, what many owners fail to understand is that their dog's misbehavior is not caused by their anger at them. They are acting up out of fear. Helping your dog overcome separation anxiety will take time and patience, but nonetheless it is an achievable goal.

There are several ways to help your pet acclimate to seclusion. Try giving them special toys reserved only for when the dog is left alone. Some like interactive toys that will keep them busier longer. Others find that teaching your dog that you will always come back home helps to ease their anxiety. For instance, leave your dog in a room or crate alone for a few minutes and then come back to show them that you will always return. I have also found that crate-training your dog works well in helping them adapt to an environment that will always be safe for them. In extreme cases,

visit a veterinarian who may also be able to help by prescribing medication to help ease your dog's nerves. The most important point to remember is to not give up and instead think about how you are ultimately helping your dog lead a more comfortable and serene life.

"Some people see training by an expert as expensive, but in the end, it is a lot cheaper than having them go through all the stress and anxiety, let alone destroy your furniture," said Dr. Oliveira.

BEAGLE MANIA

Al is a beautifully-colored young male beagle/ hound mix, about 25 pounds, likes kids and other dogs and is very friendly. To meet him, call 786-242-7377 or email <info@paws4you.org>.

WANT TO HELP US?

If you are interested in adopting a dog, becoming a foster home or volunteering with us, stop by and see us at the Colonial Palms PetSmart, 13621 S. Dixie Hwy., every Sunday (except holidays) from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. or visit our website.

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