

The Chronicles of Oliver—Part IV--Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is one of the hardest problems to work on due to the destruction that often occurs to either home or dog. It's a problem based usually either on lack of experience (a dog who is never left alone), bad experiences (dogs who have been passed from home-to-home), or genetic makeup (dogs who are anxious in a lot of situations). Those who get a dog as a puppy, should take the following steps in order to avoid developing separation anxiety issues with your dog. I'm going to start with the worst case scenario and build up from there. You can pick up these steps wherever you feel your dog can start without too much stress. Oliver started from step one (no surprise there), and we are still working through the steps a year later! He lived with an elderly woman who rarely left the home, so he became dependent on human presence and panicked at the thought of being left behind. Most of the time getting a second dog does not help this problem--it may, in fact, only double your troubles. So forget about trying any shortcuts. Roll up your sleeves. Take at least a week off from work, and jump into the following steps.

1. First your dog needs to be comfortable with you leaving the room. (Yes, this is an issue for many dogs.) Teach your dog a sit and a stay (many good books will help you with this, or join a class at the Fluvanna Dog Spot). Have your dog sit and stay in the middle of the room, preferably on a mat or dog bed. Slowly build up to walking toward the door as your dog remains in a stay. Always return to your dog before the dog gets up or gets antsy. The idea is to reward your dog for any relaxed behavior. If your dog shows anxiety long before you get to the door, start by just walking around the dog or even standing there clapping your hands and doing silly things. Many dogs with separation anxiety are anxious in general and have no idea how to relax even in your presence. If this is the case, you need to start with just teaching the dog to relax no matter what you do in the room. Toss treats at the dog whenever they show relaxed behavior. (Read last week's article on how I taught Oliver calm behavior in the crate.)
2. Once you can walk out of the room without the dog being anxious, practice this over and over. Do it without telling the dog to stay so he can walk around the room if desired. Have a cue for leaving such as "Be back later," saying it in a non-emotional way as you walk out the door. If you make leaving a big deal, it will become a big deal. Also, don't make homecoming a big deal. When you walk back in, praise the dog quietly and give a treat. Don't make leaving or greetings emotional.
3. Increase the time that you leave the dog alone. Try stuffing a KONG and leaving this with your dog so they are busy when you leave. (See the article on Chew-a-holic Dogs on my website). The time increments may be only seconds for highly stressed dogs. Don't rush this stage, and always go back into the room or house before the dog becomes frantic. If you enter when the dog is scratching at the door or barking, that behavior will escalate the next time.
4. Think about the things you do normally when you are getting ready to leave, i.e. putting on makeup, shoes, coat, picking up keys. Do these things throughout the day when you are NOT leaving so the normal leaving cues disappear. Change your normal routine around so there is nothing that builds anxiety prior to you leaving. Many dogs are in a heightened state of anxiety before you leave from typical morning routines.
5. There are some medications that can be used to help a dog relax (and you if you really need it!). Most of the long-term meds take a few weeks to really kick in, so it's not a quick solution, but often a necessary one for dogs who are over-the-edge. Talk to your vet about your options.
6. Hire a pet sitter to come in and walk your dog if you will have to leave for a long time. You may need to have the person come a few times throughout the day in the beginning until the dog learns to be left alone for longer periods of time. The expense of a pet sitter is much less than replacing chewed carpet and doorframes—or complete doors and walls in some cases.

And how is Oliver doing with these steps. Well, he still does not like it when I leave. He sits by the door sighing and waiting, but he no longer pees throughout the house (much to Stanley Steemer's dismay). We are still working on homecomings where he insists on scratching frantically at the door the moment I drive in the driveway. It takes me several minutes to get into the house, as I have to stop and turn my back every time he begins to bark or scratch the door. The idea is that I will not make any progress towards the house until he is quiet. His reward for being quiet is my walking to the house. The timeframe is shortening, but I still spend a great deal of time turning my back and waiting for calm behavior. Not fun in the rain!

The other thing Oliver had to be taught was to put something in his mouth when I entered the house. One of the ways his anxiety came out was in frantic greetings that included clawing and biting at me. In the beginning, I left a basket of toys on the front porch. When I entered the house, I handed Oliver a toy. If he dropped the toy, I picked it up and gave it to him again. The only words I would say is "Get a toy." I didn't say hello, I didn't make a fuss. Now the toy basket sits inside by the door. I won't open the door until he has a toy in his mouth. He's figured it out. Does that mean homecomings are now peaceful? No. Delilah also struggles with separation anxiety, so with two dogs stressing at the front door as I come home, the problem is intensified and still being modified. However, we have seen improvements. Eventually, I'll purchase a new front door to replace the worn, scratched one, but until the problem is extinguished completely, there's no point. Life with dogs is often about compromises and acceptance. Oliver has pushed the limits on both, but I love him and his willingness to learn new skills and his ability to teach me patience beyond that of Job!