



## SEPARATION ANXIETY vs ISOLATION DISTRESS

### Princess Was Like a Colicky Baby at Midnight, Except It Was My Friend's Toy Poodle

By Melissa McMath Hatfield, M.S., CBCC-KA, CDBC

Coming in late one night after helping with an illness in the family away from home, I was counting my blessings. A good friend living close offered their guest bedroom and said they would not be coming home until late. This was an ideal situation, as I did not have the energy for a visit—I just wanted a hot shower, jammies, and a glass of wine. Driving up, I saw her Toy Poodle Princess looking out the window and I thought “how sweet,” being too tired to notice that, perhaps, this was a red flag. I put the key into the door, and we said our hellos. As I started preparing for an evening of peace and quiet, there was a low moan and I stopped dead. It went from one octave below middle C to a final crescendo of a high C. Oh My Heavens! Separation Anxiety! Information started flooding my mind, suddenly remembering my friend mentioning something about Princess being anxious, exhibited by howls when they left.

Well, there went the hot bath, and any hope of being curled up in bed to finish the last 20 pages of a cliff-hanging novel. I was in for a long haul. First thing was to control her environment by taking chairs and blocking her access of getting behind the curtains to her lookout

post. Now that should do it! Being a smart little thing, she went to the kitchen to her second lookout point at the top of a chair. That window could not be blocked, so I picked her up and went to my room, shutting the door to minimize her environment. Surely, she will settle with us both being curled up on the bed. I was still hoping for isolation distress (ID). I picked up the book and soon the squalls and pacing started again, so I held her tight and we walked and walked. She quieted down but remained stiff, as she never relaxed. Human contact and comfort were not the answer.

My next thought was “isn't there a crate around her somewhere?” Voila! Found one in the laundry room with a night light where she eats, a familiar and safe territory. Perfect! Having safely ensconced her standing outside I held my breath and waited out of her sight. She escalated from whimpers, which were acceptable, to howls. Eleven o'clock at night was not the time to start crate training. Hoping she would stop crying, I stood in front of the crate and let her out as soon as she was silent. Holding her tight, we walked some more. Out of desperation I went to where I knew was her



safest and most secure place: her parents' bed. We both crawled in and I texted Mom and Dad, "Goldilocks is in your bed. Sorry." By the time they came home I had a behavior modification protocol at the ready for them to implement.

### Separation Anxiety vs Isolation Distress

It was apparent that Princess was not suffering from isolation distress. The resulting behavior for either can be the same: anxiety, pacing, losing bathroom manners, destructive behaviors, etc. However, these are two very distinct problems and if misdiagnosed the chances for a failed rehabilitation are great. Remember, your behavior modification or training protocol is only as good as the diagnosis. In this case diagnosis was easy and quick. It was clear that Princess was truly suffering from separation anxiety (SA) because having human contact did not reduce her anxiety. Her parents or (significant person) was missing. If it had been isolation distress having someone home would have been enough to provide comfort.

To test this with a client, sit quietly in the room and ignore the dog. Then ask the parent to leave the room. If the dog becomes anxious when a specific person leaves, even with you there, you are dealing with SA. If the dog is soothed, or even distracted by you then you are dealing with isolation distress. To confirm, next you leave the room leaving the dog all alone. Chances are the dog will start whimpering and/or scratching on the door. This would be isolation distress and is easy to fix. Just leaving a dog alone and videoing it will not tell you which you are dealing with. Treating for SA with a dog with ID is overkill while treating ID for a dog suffering SA certainly will guarantee a failed rehabilitation. For SA, it's not about being alone that is the issue but about not being able to cope away from a significant person.

Isolation distress protocol is simple. There are several options that can help a dog be comforted when left alone. Turn on television, a radio, or take Fido to a friend's when you have to leave, hire a sitter and, yes, perhaps another dog (if appropriate) would help. Several options from the SA protocol can be implemented as well such as restricting their environment, crate training and being aware of co-dependent behaviors.

- ◀◀ Princess exhibited separation anxiety rather than isolation distress.
- ◀ Princess on her perch where she anxiously awaits the return of her owner, Sarah Blanz.

Separation anxiety is much more difficult because it has to be done very methodically, in small increments, and generally takes a lot of time, effort and planning on the part of the pet parent. The dog must be kept under threshold before progressing to the next step. You cannot be in a hurry setting your own goals and agenda for accomplishment. Fido will tell you at every step his level of comfort—listen and be observant! No more just walking out the door telling them you will be back soon and for him to behave. Separation anxiety generally escalates in its frequency, intensity, and duration so professional help is highly recommended.

First, restrict the environment or area. The smaller the space, the greater chance for reduction in anxiety; the larger the space, the greater chance for increased anxiety. So many pet parents feel they are giving the dog the gift of freedom by letting it roam loose and have access to whatever room they want. A familiar smaller space is ideal and in many (non severe) cases can provide immediate results.

Crate training is ideal, but for some this is not viable. It is not unusual to learn Fido had been "crate trained," but became so anxious he hurt himself and or destroyed the crate resulting in the crate being removed. When questioned, it is also not uncommon to learn they put Fido in, shut the door and walked away. What's not for him to like, right? With these cases, place the crate in a confined area with the door always open and a pet gate at the entry to the room. You might hear, "Well, he will crawl up and over the gate or tear it down." Nicole Wilde has an excellent book, "Don't Leave Me," with a step-by-step protocol with some exercises the parent can implement easily.

Secondly, identify the triggers. Control and or eliminate them, if possible. It is not abnormal to learn the dog was fine up until a move, renovation of the house, or the loss of a pet parent. A change in the environment can be a trigger. An example of controlling a trigger is the dog becomes anxious when the parent picks up the car keys, purse or leash. Whatever the trigger is, have the parent pick it up several times a day, then put down in a different place and continue going about their daily routine. After a while the dog learns picking up the stimulus may not result in the anticipated result.

Third, seek professional help. Parents will have to make a commitment and be truly motivated to follow it. Since SA escalates and becomes more intense over time, it is imperative they understand the dog will not "get over" this. And the let-them-cry-it-out theory that some subscribe to is not only cruel, but it just makes a bad situation worse.

### Most can be rehabilitated

- Correct diagnoses are imperative.
- Reduction of space/access in the environment.
- Crate training if there has not been a prior traumatic experience.
- If the dog has had that unfortunate experience then find a small, familiar (that's the key) place that is part of his everyday routine. Putting him in the garage or basement or in an environment that is not part of his daily routine would be traumatic and isolating. In Princess's case, I suggested putting her on her parents' bed and put the gate between the master bedroom door and hall. This was her known safe place.
- Choose a "safe place" that can be incorporated into the day-to-day-activities. You must be able to see and communicate with each other. The goal is to get Fido used to being by himself but still see the family. He must not feel isolated, confined or abandoned. The kitchen or family room is optimal.
- Place the crate in this space with the door always open and the gate up.
- Feed all meals in the crate. At least twice a day (during meal time) he is learning it is OK to be in his safe place but is not isolated.
- Hopefully when the gate is down, he will learn to choose to go to his safe place voluntarily.
- When he does reinforce with treats or a Kong.
- A fun and simple exercise the parent can practice, and, if there are children, they can easily participate as well. Stand at a door, ask for a sit, a wait, offer a treat followed with "we'll be back" verbal cue, walking out and shutting the door behind you. Immediately reopen, walk back in, and offer another treat. Repeat, repeat, and repeat. Slowly increase the time standing outside before re-entry, always making sure that Fido stays below threshold. Don't let him fail, listen to him and follow his lead. This exercise is like playing the child's "peek-a-boo" game.
- Purchase a Thunder Shirt.
- Provide a Kong or high-value toy, reserving this for only the times when he is left, paired with, "I'll be back." Practice this first by putting him in his crate, turn away, count to one and then immediately turn back around, treat. Slowly increase your time turned away and increase the distance from the crate.
- Never suggest giving a bully stick or bone when leaving, for obvious reasons. You would be surprised how many pet parents do this so ask!
- Visit with your vet about a calming agent. If the dog is in distress and not just stressed, e.g., salivating, trembling, shaking, hurting himself or demolishing the environment, then medication should be considered.

### The Co-Dependent Pet Parent

An entire chapter can be written about this. So often the parents are unknowingly creating SA though excessive hellos upon entry and excessive goodbyes when leaving, or when Fido is showing signs of stress or anxiety they instinctively begin to coo and baby

talk, reassuring him that everything is OK. This just reinforces the dog's emotional state; "if mom is that anxious then I must be right?" Sometimes it's just a matter of pointing this out and educating the parent. Analogies are an excellent tool to communicate awareness and education. Ask them if they have raised or are raising a child. Regardless of personal experience, they should understand a parent who shows anxiety does not calm an anxious child. To an anxious dog, the high pitch baby talk can be reinforcing, causing more anxiety in the dog, causing the parents to coo even more. It becomes a vicious circle. Now ask them to imagine how reassuring it would be for a parent to tell the child it's OK in a calm and firm manner. However, there are some parents who truly are co-dependent and have been very diligent and thorough (knowingly or unknowingly) in creating a dog that is extremely dependent, clingy and lacking in self-confidence. Hopefully pointing this out to the parent and giving them examples will help them see the light.

### Summary

The protocol for SA is incremental, detailed and has to be tailor made specifically to incorporate the dog, his history, temperament, caretakers, their schedules and environment. The dog must always be below threshold before the next step is implemented. This article just touched on the basics in general and the importance of a correct diagnosis as separation anxiety is treated differently than isolation distress because the "cause" is different. More often than not the dog is suffering from ID and the rehabilitation is simple and immediate. There are some dogs, however, that cannot be fully rehabilitated even with professional help and may always need some form of extra help and management such as medication, play dates, and house sitters. The SA protocol is a slow one, requiring time, patience and commitment. Some parents are not capable or motivated to follow such a protocol. Dogs and owners are often stressed to their limits. In these cases, parents find themselves not only rearranging their schedules but their lifestyle as well. Remember, if it is isolation distress sitters or play dates are a viable option; if it is separation anxiety, though, the dog will still be anxious even with a sitter, just like Princess.



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