

Letters to the Editor

More thoughts on separation anxiety

Dr. Myrna L. Papurt offers a skeptical view of the condition termed separation anxiety, instead suggesting that the signs are more likely attributable to boredom (*JAVMA*, Oct 1, 2001, pp 910). She raises an important point. Boredom has been given little attention by the veterinary profession, yet research suggests that it can be associated with substantial suffering.¹ It is likely that some of the distress experienced by pets left at home is attributable to boredom resulting from insufficient stimulation.

However, it seems unlikely that the signs described for separation anxiety can be accounted for by the emotional state of boredom. Specifically, if the signs of distress are caused by boredom and not separation anxiety:

1. Why is the condition frequently triggered within minutes of the owner leaving, and often before the owner leaves?²
2. Why is the condition often not alleviated with activities, interactive toys, the presence of other animals, and even interaction with other humans?
3. Why don't the signs occur when the owner is present but not interacting with the dog, such as when the owner is asleep?
4. Why is the incidence of the condition higher in shelter source dogs?³
5. Why does the condition respond to behavior modification techniques (desensitization and counterconditioning),¹ which do not address boredom?
6. Why does the condition respond to tricyclic antidepressants?²

Dr. Papurt states that she “doesn't believe that my dog loves me so much that he goes crazy in

my absence.” She does accept, however, that separation anxiety exists in puppies. In her brief review of the evolution of dogs, she fails to point out that one of the most important developments in the domestication process (evolution) of domestic dogs is the selective retention of puppy-like characteristics, both physical (eg, shorter muzzles) and psychologic (eg, play behavior, face-licking, submissiveness, emotional dependency), a process termed neoteny.⁴ Many researchers now view dogs as infantilized wolves stuck in an early stage of development—wolf cubs that never fully mature. The result is that today's adult domestic dog is, for all intents and purposes, emotionally wired like a puppy. Accordingly, the presence of separation anxiety in adult dogs (which Dr. Papurt rejects) is evolutionarily consistent with the presence of separation anxiety in puppies (which Dr. Papurt accepts).

This issue is far more important than a debate over semantics. Just as in treating physical pain and distress, an accurate diagnosis of the specific emotional distress is essential to its effective relief. The distress of boredom must be given serious attention, and when it is present by itself or coexists with separation anxiety, it should be aggressively treated. However, properly recognizing and treating the suffering of separation anxiety is essential to alleviating the emotional pain these animals endure.

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1. Wemelsfelder F. Boredom and laboratory animal welfare. In: Rollin BE, Kesel ML, eds. *The experimental animal in biomedical research*. Boca Raton, Fla: CRC Press Inc, 1990;243–272.

2. Voith VL, Borchelt PL. Separation anxiety in dogs. In: Voith VL, Borchelt PL, eds. *Readings in companion animal behavior*. Trenton, NJ: Veterinary Learning Systems, 1996;124–139.

3. Flannigan G, Dodman NH. Risk factors and behaviors associated with separation anxiety in dogs. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2001;219:460–466.

4. Coren S. *The intelligence of dogs*. New York: Free Press, 1994;37–41.

Dr. Papurt responds:

In his very interesting letter, Dr. McMillan equates boredom with distress.

Roget's Thesaurus defines distress in the following terms: grief, torment, woe, affliction, agony, and anguish. In my opinion, the average dog that is destructive, dirty, and noisy in its owner's absence is not in distress as so defined. The dogs don't carry out these adverse behaviors because they are experiencing grief or torment. Yet again, I feel that the average misbehaving dog simply has no other outlet for its energy.

I have never implied that true separation anxiety in dogs does not exist. I do attest that the condition is so rare that it is seldom, if ever, encountered by the average practitioner. Some of the questions posed in Dr. McMillan's letter may apply only to these very uncommon cases. Items one, two, and three in his letter are examples. I wonder just how many dogs the average practitioner treats that tear up the

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couch and defecate on the floor the instant the owners reach for their coats. How many dogs commit these acts when any person is present, even if the person is asleep in the dogs' vicinity?

Item four in Dr. McMillan's letter requires special attention. My considerable experience with humane societies leads me to question the statement that the "incidence of this condition is higher in shelter source dogs." This implies that the former shelter dog cannot tolerate the absence of its new owner, because it is so insecure from being abandoned or because it is so grateful for being rescued. I doubt that dogs possess the mentality to grasp the concepts of abandonment and rescue.

However, there is a reason for this misperception. The most common shelter-source dog is an adolescent or young adult of a large breed. This describes the very animal that is most likely to be dirty, noisy, and destructive when left alone. Is it not likely that they were placed in a shelter because they were dirty, noisy, and destructive in their former homes? This in no way implies that large, young dogs should not be adopted from shelters. It indicates that people who do so should have the information and the facilities to handle their pets correctly.

Item five in Dr. McMillan's letter is also of interest. Yes, misbehavior usually does respond to behavior modification techniques. We used to call this training.

Finally, the active misbehaviors accredited to separation anxiety often (not always) respond to tricyclic antidepressants. The reason is simple: the drugs reduce the dogs' perceived need for activity. The drugged dog is not as interested in finding something to chew or to bark at.

Separation anxiety in puppies is something that every new owner expects. Puppies cry when left alone the first few nights. I cannot interpret this to mean that the domestic dog is somehow stuck forever in a state of neoteny.

My point is that true separation anxiety is very rare. I believe that the signs popularly attributed to separation anxiety are commit-

ted by dogs that are neither trained nor restrained to prevent these adverse activities. I cannot believe that millions of pet dogs are in abject misery because they are not on prescription mood-altering drugs.

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Thinks complication rates should be put in perspective

While reviewing the article "Assessment of claims of short- and long-term complications associated with onychectomy in cats" (*JAVMA*, Oct 1, 2001, pp 932-937), I was struck by an inconsistency in veterinary society's level of concern toward complications. In particular, I am referring to the complication rate of vaccine-associated sarcomas versus the complication rate of onychectomy in cats. In the article "Vaccine-associated feline sarcomas" (*JAVMA*, Mar 1, 2001, pp 697-702), sarcomas are noted to develop at a rate of 1 case/10,000 cats to 10 cases/10,000 cats after the administration of rabies and feline leukemia virus vaccines. Feline leukemia is a leading cause of death in cats. Even so, we are advised to decrease our frequency of vaccination and change our protocols on the basis of the 1/10,000 to 10/10,000 rate of complication. The onychectomy article lists a rate of complications as low as 0.86% and as high as 33%. This is a very high complication rate, particularly for an elective surgery. To decrease our frequency of vaccination against fatal diseases because of a complication rate of 1/10,000 to 10/10,000 yet to continue to perform an elective procedure with a complication rate of 0.86 to 33% just does not make sense to me. I understand that the complication of sarcoma is severe and often fatal. Permanent lameness, biting, or house soiling after onychectomy can also result in fatality when a frustrated owner decides to euthanize the cat.

Certainly the percentage of complications after onychectomy should encourage all surgeons to reconsider performing this procedure. There are plenty of alternatives to onychectomy. I do not

know any satisfactory alternatives to vaccinating to prevent feline leukemia and rabies. An elective procedure with a high complication rate and a plethora of alternatives is a "low hanging fruit" type of problem to solve. Although it makes the most sense to do all that we can to prevent all types of complications, it does not make sense to give little attention to those common procedures with high complication rates while spending so much time and attention on those common procedures with low complication rates.

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Does not believe there is an ovarian remnant syndrome

I am writing about the Oct 15, 2001 *JAVMA* Theriogenology Question of the Month article (pp 1065-1066). I am disturbed that the discussion refers to ovarian remnant syndrome as a disorder. In my opinion, it is only a fancy name that candy coats the real issue, which is that an incomplete ovariohysterectomy (OHE) was performed by the veterinary surgeon doing the OHE!

I am talking about the approximately one-inch OHE incision just cranial to the cervix to remove the ovaries and uterus. On a typical cat, the uterus is about three-and-a-half to four inches. (I've not actually measured one, so this is a guess and it isn't backed up by any scientific studies.) This means the surgeon who is removing the four-inch uterus through a one-inch incision has to stretch the uterus and ovaries (and their blood vessels) to the one-inch opening and pull out as much as he or she possibly can without rupturing the blood vessels or tearing apart a possibly friable uterus.

I have had to perform second OHE surgeries on more than one occasion to remove a piece of ovarian tissue left inside, because the ovaries were not completely removed. A local veterinary surgery specialist has had to do the same surgery on numerous occasions. He has removed sections of uterus with pyometra in supposedly spayed cats and dogs. His comment