



Introduction

Dogs, like humans, are highly social creatures. They enjoy the company of others, forge strong emotional attachments, and live in communal groups. In modern society, we have become our dogs' packs—their families. This arrangement has many benefits for both dogs and humans, and affords the opportunity to form close bonds of love and trust. But just as some children become nervous when their parents are away, many dogs experience anxiety when their people are absent.

The level of stress a dog feels when isolated or when separated from a particular person or persons may be mild, moderate, or in some cases, so intense that it constitutes a state of full-blown panic. Dealing with this type of issue can cause owners to feel a measure of strain as well. As a loving dog owner, it can be both frustrating and heart-wrenching to know that your dog is suffering and yet to be unable to convey that you'll be returning shortly, or that being left alone is not the end of the world.

You may have read articles about separation anxiety, asked friends for advice, or even consulted with a professional dog trainer or behavior specialist. Perhaps the prescribed rehabilitation plans seemed reasonable, but implementing them was not feasible. Or maybe the information you received was confusing, as it conflicted with suggestions from other sources. Perhaps you've already tried a few techniques or attempted a lengthy behavioral protocol, only to give up in dismay.

Whether your current attempt to solve your dog's difficulties is the beginning of a new journey or another stop along what has seemed like an endless road, I have two pieces of good news: first, you are not in this alone. As a professional dog trainer who specializes in behavior issues, I

have helped many of my clients and their dogs through separation-related problems. I have coached them each step of the way until their dogs could safely be left alone, whether for five minutes or five hours.

I am also a dog mom. When my husband and I finally decided to get another dog a year after our last dog had passed, I scoured the local shelters and humane societies. Three months of intense searching yielded our perfect match—a lovely, gentle, year-and-a-half old husky-keeshond mix. During the adoption process, the staff member who handled our paperwork revealed that the dog had been in the shelter four times previously. We soon found out why. Sierra, as we named her, not only had the talent of Houdini, but also had serious separation issues. It was easy to imagine her watching her owners leave, and then escaping in a frantic attempt to follow them.

During the first two weeks with our sweet girl, I would return home from doing errands to find her panting heavily, eyes wild. Although she hadn't destroyed anything, she'd clearly been upset. To gauge the intensity of her distress, I set up a camcorder and then left the house for 45 minutes. A review of the footage revealed Sierra whining while pacing from door to window, back and forth, scanning the area where she'd seen us leave. Her whining progressed to intermittent barking, which escalated into a frantic series of barks, and finally, a mournful, pitiful howling that tore at my heart.

As emotionally difficult as dealing with Sierra's rehabilitation process was at times, having dealt with separation issues both professionally and personally has placed me in the perfect position to support you through your own dog's healing process. You'll be hearing more about Sierra's journey throughout the book, as I will share the techniques that were effective in helping her.

The second bit of good news is that there are now better behavior protocols and a greater number of supplementary products available than ever before to address separation issues. You will find them described in these pages.

The length of time required for your dog to stop feeling anxious when left alone will depend on the severity of the issue, your dog's temperament,

your home environment, and the amount of effort put forth. But know that in the majority of cases, the issue is solvable, or at least manageable. If your dog's stress level is mild, vast improvements could be seen in as little as a few weeks. In the majority of moderate cases, however, recovery can be more on the order of a few months or longer. In extreme cases, it could take upwards of a year, but even then, it would be realistic to expect to see some progress within the first few months. The most valuable asset your dog will have throughout the rehabilitation process is *you*. So as a caring owner who wants to help your beloved dog to feel secure and to have a good quality of life, take heart, have patience, and know that your goals are likely to be reasonable and reachable.

~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~ * ~

A cookie-cutter approach to solving behavior problems cannot possibly work for every dog. The information and attention to detail provided in each chapter will allow you to customize a behavior modification plan that takes into account your dog's particular issues, and the unique aspects of your lifestyle. The interactive format is designed to encourage you to become a fully engaged participant in your dog's recovery. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the problem, you will instead gain the necessary confidence and skills to put your dog at ease.

First, you'll learn about what separation anxiety is—and what it isn't. The distinction is an important one because if, for example, your dog's symptoms are actually due to boredom or a lack of exercise, approaching the case as one of separation-related distress will not solve the problem. By considering carefully crafted questions and performing quick, easy experiments, you will determine whether your dog has a true separation issue and, if so, which type.

A brief discussion of possible causes follows. Then it's on to the Firm Foundation Program, which will help you to lay a solid base upon which a sound behavioral protocol can be built. The first pillar of the Program is management. You'll get plenty of creative "home alone" ideas for those times when you need to leave the house, whether briefly or for a longer period. Having a variety of options is crucial, because there is nothing so frustrating as feeling you are being held hostage in your own home!

The next two pillars of the Program are nutrition and exercise. Their role in keeping your dog calm and relaxed cannot be emphasized strongly enough. Even if you are well versed on the subjects, you might be surprised at some of the things you'll discover.

Developing confidence is the final pillar of the Program, and it's a pivotal one. You'll learn how to boost your dog's confidence in ways that will be fun for both of you. Increased self-confidence will allow your dog to cope more easily with difficult situations, including being left alone.

The potential benefits of medication in treating separation anxiety will also be discussed. While many dogs with separation issues can be rehabilitated without the use of drugs, for others, pharmacological intervention is the key that opens the door for behavior modification efforts to be successful.

Once a foundation has been laid, it's on to the Behavior Modification section, where a protocol will be tailored to your dog's individual needs. You will be able to determine where to start, at what pace you should work, and when to advance to the next level. Don't worry that the process will be complicated; it won't. Recording your progress along the way will help you to stay motivated and on track.

To solve complex behavior problems, it is sometimes necessary to think outside the box. To that end, the final section of this book explores tools and products with which you may not be familiar, but which might be just the thing to help your dog. The *Resources* section contains information on where to find each one, as well as extensive information on other helpful books, organizations, and products.

Throughout the book, you will find stories that were contributed by professional canine behavior specialists. Each narrative details how a particular dog's separation anxieties were addressed. Some cases concern a client's dog, while others involve the trainer's own dog. The issues range from mild or moderate to some that are more severe, including a dog whose anxiety drove her onto a third-story ledge! What all of the accounts have in common is that they will give you a better idea of how behavioral treatment plans look when implemented in real life, and what type of results can be achieved.

Solving your dog's separation issues will require patience and dedication, but rest assured, you can do it. After all, you're armed with a strong love for your dog and all the information you need. The reward for your efforts will be a dog who can remain home alone feeling calm and relaxed—and that will bring peace of mind to you both.