



APBC

ASSOCIATION OF PET
BEHAVIOUR COUNSELLORS

Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors
www.apbc.org.uk E: info@apbc.org.uk

YOUR DOG

Pet Anxiety Month

Introduction

Behavioural problems related to anxiety are common in the domestic dog (it is thought that almost 50% of the UK dog population suffer from 'separation anxiety' alone). Pet insurance companies reported that in 2019, behavioural claims increased by up to 50% on 2018 claims – underlying anxiety will undoubtedly have been a common component in many of these cases. Anxiety is induced by *anticipation* of a negative event that may or may not occur, where fear is defined as the behavioural response shown to *actual* danger.

Imagine being scared of spiders. Someone shows you a box with a huge spider in it – you experience a fear response. If someone told you that within a certain room, or at a certain time of day, a huge spider might appear, you would experience situational anxiety in that room or around that time. However, if someone told you that a huge spider could suddenly appear at any time or any place, you are likely to experience generalised anxiety which can lead to chronic stress.

Examples of common scenarios where dogs exhibit situational anxiety include waiting in the veterinary reception area (anticipating a negative/painful event occurring when the vet sees them), when the clocks change and the nights draw in (anticipating previous fear-inducing firework noises), on a walk (anticipating a scary dog round the next corner), or when left at home alone (anticipating another burglary attempt). A dog who is unable to control or predict when they might be exposed to something unpleasant or painful is likely to be in a near constant state of generalised anxiety.

Body Language

Body language that may indicate an anxious state includes lip licking (anxiety can inhibit salivation, or conversely can lead to excessive salivation – sounds contradictory because it is, but it's related to complex hormonal/neurotransmitter responses!), yawning (often used to communicate a feeling of uneasiness or to calm themselves back down after a negative experience), licking at themselves or others, social withdrawal or increased sleep, avoidance of situations, tail position lowered, lowered body posture, a front paw raised, flattened or pulled back ears, dilated pupils, panting (not due to physical exercise or heat), hypervigilance, trembling, excessive shedding of hair or dandruff, sweaty paws, pacing, hiding, or attempts to hide such as digging.

How Can we Reduce The Risk of Anxiety Developing?

Multiple factors influence the development of behaviours associated with anxiety in dogs



Genetics

It is important that breeders select temperamentally robust dogs to prevent the potential for anxious dispositions to be inherited.

Maternal Stress & The Neonatal Period

Studies show that stress experienced during pregnancy negatively affects stress reactivity in offspring. Therefore, attempts should be made to ensure the mum's environment and her experiences during pregnancy are as stress-free as possible. Providing neonatal (3-6 day old) puppies with a stimulating environment and mild stressors (in the form of handling) have been shown to promote resilience when older (the capacity to recover quickly and adapt after a difficult event).

Personality Types

Individuals can be shy or bold or anything in between. These varying personality types also have different coping strategies. 'Proactive' individuals express obvious behavioural signs that might not be desirable from the owner's perspective, but they are actually beneficial in terms of the dog's ability

to manage stressful situations and reduce the risk of emotional disorders. Other dogs may appear less overtly anxious because their coping strategy is more passive, but they are actually experiencing the same underlying negative emotion as individuals who express outward symptoms. Anxiety is also linked to pessimism (expecting the worst).

Weaning

In natural environments, the process of weaning is gradual with puppies becoming increasingly more emotionally and nutritionally independent. Under human control, the mum is often removed suddenly from her puppies which can cause distress that can last for several weeks. Conversely, repeated, short periods of separation from the mum increases the puppies' resilience to stressful events later in life.

Socialisation Period

Breeders have an important role in terms of introducing puppies to potential stressors. Between 3-12 weeks of age, puppies learn what aspects of their environment are normal and safe, so everything they experience during this 'socialisation period' is likely to be accepted when encountered later in life. Equally, anything that they do not come across during this period is much more likely to produce a fear response after twelve weeks of age. The greater the variety of positive experiences they have during this window, the more likely they are to cope with new experiences in the future. However, the sensitivity of the young puppy's brain means that exposure to a scary or overwhelming situation during this period may have long-term negative effects. Exposure to potential stressors that gradually increase in intensity and duration has positive effects on emotional reactivity and problem solving.

Studies have produced mixed results regarding the potential benefits of puppy socialisation classes on later behaviour. Training methods used in classes are variable and the extent to which they may contribute to reducing potential anxiety will depend on the setup and attentiveness to each individual puppy's behavioural

responses. Play and relaxed social interactions provide ideal contexts for puppies to encounter novel situations and learn that they are not threatening. Adaptil Junior (a synthetic version of the pheromone that the mum produces when she is lactating her puppies) will help puppies feel calmer and safer when encountering new experiences.

Training Methods & Relationship With Owner

Interactions between dogs and owners may affect numerous aspects of social behaviour. Research has shown that dog owners who shared more activities with their dogs were less likely to categorize them as "nervous". Responding appropriately to our dogs when they are exposed to a stress-inducing event can induce a calming effect. One study showed that 20 minutes of gentle stroking inhibited the immediate increase of cortisol (the stress hormone) when dogs were given an injection. Historically, advice consisted of ignoring your dog if they exhibited fear or anxiety because it was believed there was a risk of reinforcing these emotional states. However, you cannot reinforce emotions. Coping strategies and the behavioural response may have the potential to be reinforced.

Some human interaction can be detrimental and increase the likelihood of fear and anxiety developing. Punishment-based training methods are likely to increase levels of fear and anxiety and lead to negative associations with other environmental stimuli. Tension in the lead will contribute to the dog feeling more restrained, with fewer behavioural options. It will also cause the dog to tense as they brace themselves against the pressure from the lead (known as the opposition reflex). Instead, providing the dog with the choice of whether to approach or retreat to a safe distance from which to observe enables them to feel greater control and reduces the likelihood of a dog experiencing fear and anxiety.

Treatment of Anxiety

There is a link between generalised anxiety and skin conditions (cortisol, the stress hormone, makes skin more sensitive and reactive; itchy skin

then increases a negative emotional state and the cycle continues), digestive problems (there's loads of interesting research on the gut-brain link), and pain-related conditions. Anxious individuals tend to have tension throughout their body which will impact on chronic pain, and anticipation of pain creates anxiety. Consequently, a full veterinary workup should always be the first step to ensure there is no underlying physical conditions contributing to the anxiety. Referral to a qualified behaviourist (see The Animal Behaviour and Training Council www.abtcouncil.org.uk) is recommended for any dog who exhibits fearful responses and/or generalised anxiety due to potential welfare implications. These conditions are likely to continue to exacerbate overtime, so seeking professional advice as quickly as possible is recommended for best chance of improving the dog's quality of life.

To best prepare dogs for a range of situations and activities, gradual adaptation from initially predictable routines to more variable schedules will create an expectation of the unexpected, leading dogs to cope better with unpredictable scenarios when they occur. Exercises to increase confidence and build resilience (recovery after mildly difficult events), as well as encouraging relaxation in specific situations (using scentwork, chews, and items to lick at), will reduce underlying anxiety. Adaptil can be provided as a plug-in diffuser for situational anxiety in the home, or as a spray for anxiety related to travel or the vets, and as a collar for more generalised anxiety. Nutraceuticals or herbal supplements may also help reduce general anxiety levels. Ensuring the dog feels safe (controlling exposure to fear-inducing events) and then altering any fearful responses (by exposing the dog to the scary thing in dilute form and associating it with something the dog loves) will automatically reduce corresponding anxiety. The behaviourist may need to liaise with the referring vet regarding psychoactive medication in cases where the dog is causing injury to itself (e.g. compulsive behaviours) or where exposure to potential triggers cannot be controlled.