

## CRITTER CHATTER-Anxiety

As a veterinarian of several years, I have seen many additions, developments, and changes which have helped to develop the revolution of today's veterinary visits. One of the most common challenges that owners face today, is dealing with their dog's anxiety. Anxiety is very common in the veterinary office because the dog is away from their normal environment, and in addition is walking into an office full of sounds and smells that may not be very welcoming. Having unfamiliar people all around; taking blood samples, temperatures, etc. only worsens the anxiety. Many dogs will tuck their tails, pant excessively, hide behind or under their owners, dart their eyes, and flatten their ears.

Anxiety in the veterinary office is understandable, but many dogs will often become anxious in their home environments from loud or unexpected noises, changes in the home/owners, or in the absence of the owner(s). Many of these dogs will develop a "panic attack" of sorts, and may urinate or defecate in the owner's absence. Some dogs can even be destructive and chew on baseboards, walls, floors, or doors, and can even injure themselves in their anxiety. If left untreated, many of these dogs will find themselves at the local animal shelter or worse.

When adopting a pet, we want to be the best owner possible and often want for our pets to become an integral part of our lives. We often treat them as our fur babies, allowing them to sleep in our beds and eat from our tables. We often provide them with attention first thing when we come home or when they get a little noisy or disruptive. Our pets do not come preprogrammed, and it is up to us to teach them housetraining, acceptable behaviors, and nonacceptable behaviors.

Anxiety develops when a dog does not know what to do, or how to act. Two common things are universally desired by all dogs-food and attention, but we must teach them what we consistently want and how they should consistently act. The goal for our pet dogs should be to make them confident and calm, and not reinforce unwanted or dramatic behavior, anxiety, or excited activity.

There are some key things that we can do as owners to help prevent or to help minimize anxiety:

1. Ignore any attention-seeking, anxious, or dramatic behavior. Provide positive reinforcement for only calm and relaxed behavior. An example would be to ignore the excitable greeting when you first come home but instead provide petting, massage, or interactive behavior once the dog has relaxed and is sitting.

2. Provide a safe place such as a crate, mat, or small room where the dog feels safe, secure, and away from children, interruption, harm, or scolding. This acts very much like a bedroom where the dog can retreat to chew on a toy or rawhide, take a nap, or just be by him/herself. The goal is to make this area a safe, happy area and not an area of negativity or an area used only for time out.

3. Provide a consistent schedule. In this manner, dogs are very much like people and children. Regular times for feeding, play time, exercise, bathroom time are vital to the well being and security of dogs.

4. Provide plenty of avenues for exercise and activity throughout the day. Taking walks, playing fetch or tug of war, engaging in a game of keep away, or allowing chew time on Kong toys, rawhides, chew toys, or providing puzzle toys are all excellent ways to provide quality time.

A number of products can also prove helpful for treating anxiety. Products that contain pheromones are available to help relax dogs, and come in collars, sprays, or plug-in diffusers. A pheromone is a chemical produced by an animal that helps to change the behavior of other members of its species. Several over-the-counter products which contain herbs such as lavender or chamomile, tryptophan, CBD oil, or similar products may help to relax the dog. Some food companies also have diets formulated to help relax pets. Prescription drugs can also be used for anxiety but can have side effects, so it is best to discuss these with your dog's veterinarian to help determine which medication may be best for your pet.