



Separation Anxiety in Pet Owners

Tracy Krulik

Patricia McConnell had me at “separation anxiety.” But maybe not in the way you’d normally think.

“I do indeed suffer from separation anxiety when I leave my dogs,” the renowned animal behaviorist and author said in her 2014 APDT conference keynote presentation, “People, Dogs and Psychological Trauma.” “I don’t know about you, but I’m already starting to stress lick,” McConnell said while pretending to rapidly preen the top of her front right paw. “What makes it okay is that I’ve come to talk with a group of people who are as stupid in love with their dogs as I am. So I’m in good company, and that helps a tremendous amount.”

My reaction? I’m not alone!

Actually, “I” should be “we,” because my husband Tom suffers as much as I do anytime we leave our pets at home. After we flew to Paris in the summer of 2009, for example, we gave serious thought to hopping back on the plane for an immediate return trip to Washington, D.C. We were sick at the thought of being away from our cuddly sweet cats Briscoe and Curtiss for a week.

It turns out that separation anxiety in pet owners — ranging from a reluctance to leave their dog home for even a few minutes, to a complete inability to travel at all — is a lot more common than I realized. “It’s more rare for me to find a dog owner who doesn’t have some level of anxiety

about leaving their dog,” says Pamela Rachil, owner of Woofy University training, daycare and boarding in Rochester, New York.

For some people, the problem can become quite debilitating. “I’ve really worried about some clients, because they haven’t been on a vacation in 12 years,” McConnell says in a telephone interview following the conference. “Their marriage is suffering. They’re exhausted. They’re burnt out.”

Pet owners who struggle with time away from their four-legged family members seem to fall somewhere on a continuum where on one extreme the dog has some degree of separation anxiety (or isolation distress), and on the other, the human does.

In homes where the dog struggles, owners can have both emotional and logistical challenges to contend with until the dog’s issues resolve. On the other end of the spectrum, the dog is fine; it’s the owner who suffers.

“It’s so individual,” says Faith Maloney, co-founder of Best Friends Animal Society, who along with psychologist Linda Harper, PhD, runs the annual Giving Heart Retreat (<http://bestfriends.org/What-We-Do/Events/Event-Items/Giving-Heart-Retreat>), a three-day workshop that helps people with problems such as this. “Every single situation that I’ve come across is unique to that person or that family,” she says.

One scenario does pop up a lot though, she says. Something bad happens while the owner is away — the dog becomes sick at a boarding kennel, for example, or the pet sitter somehow forgets to show up. “Then based on some of these rather traumatic experiences, people say, ‘I can never leave again,’” Maloney says.

For some, the mere fact that their dog had a rough past before they adopted him can keep them tethered.

“I’ve got rescues,” says Sarah Bartley of Luling, Texas, who currently shares her home with a 14-year-old Pit Bull/Greyhound mix, an 8-year-old Shepherd/Border Collie mix, two previously neglected horses and, yes, even a rescued bearded dragon.

“I just feel like, I gave my dogs my word when I took them on, that they would have the best life possible,” she says. “They’ve come to love me, so I don’t want to go out without them.”

I can relate.

I’ve made a similar promise to my Beagle Emma, who was a caged breeder before she came to live with us. She crawled into my lap the moment I first met her at the North Shore Animal League in New York, and my lap remains Emma’s safe place when she’s scared or insecure.

Emma had it rough before we took her in. It breaks my heart seeing the wire marks on her teeth or the gaps where the more damaged teeth were removed. And, frankly, I love that Emma wants to press into me every chance she can get and comes straight to me when she needs support. But when I comfort her, am I making it harder for Emma stand on her own two, er, four feet?

“Your dog, you can’t change what happened to her. You cannot make up for that somehow,” McConnell says. “But what you can do is do everything you can to help your dog be a healthy, happy, and stable individual.”

“Dogs who have been really damaged tend to be brittle. But we’re working towards creating individuals who are more flexible, who can bend rather than crack,” she says. “So I think part of rehabilitation for a traumatized dog is helping them learn to cope with change, and one change that occurs is the owner is gone.”

Understanding that the best thing Tom and I can do

now for Emma is to help her develop the confidence and comfort level to be alone has helped us “cut the cord,” if you will.

“When you think about what you’re really doing, to be effective as a pet owner,” says Pamela Uncles, MED, CDDBC, a Northern Virginia-based animal behavior consultant who works with us, “giving those dogs the skills to be independent is one of the best gifts you can give them.”

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In our case, understanding this concept and working on independence training

with Emma has helped us to leave home for longer and longer periods of time. But again, that’s what works for us. Every situation is different.

As such, the first step in resolving the issue is figuring out where the fears and anxiety stem from. The dog? The owner? Both?

My husband and I have two threads of concerns.

First of all, we have trust issues regarding care for our pets when we leave town. We were burned on more than one occasion when a pet sitter failed to show up. Over one Thanksgiving, for example, when we were visiting family in Florida, we realized on Friday night that our sitter — a front desk staff person from our animal hospital — had not yet been over to feed Briscoe and Curtiss. Tom caught the earliest flight out Saturday morning and fed the kitties their first meal since we left town two days before.

To resolve this issue, and without going into too much detail, let’s just say that I thoroughly researched Northern Virginia pet sitters until I found a great match for our needs. We feel very comfortable knowing that they take great care of Emma when we can’t be home.

The second issue, as I’ve said, is that Emma the Beagle does indeed suffer from separation anxiety. Both of our cats died from a congenital heart condition as well as severe asthma, so I’ve had years of practice staying home to care for physically ill pets. Now I’m staying home with a mentally shaky one. And doing so is making me batty.

This past fall I entered into the Raising Canine professional dog training program. Part of my motivation to do so was to better understand dog behavior so that I could leave my home without worrying about Emma or feeling immense

guilt each time I shut the door. Fortunately, as a freelance writer, my time is flexible enough to be able to take on such endeavors. Not every dog owner has that luxury or even wants it.

This is where dog trainers and behavior consultants can provide a wonderful service to clients, and there appears to be a ripe market for the picking. It didn't take me very long to realize that Patricia McConnell, my husband, and I were not the only pet parents suffering from this affliction.

Before I began learning about dog behavior and training in my coursework, I would have jumped at the opportunity to work one-on-one with a dog trainer or even attend an hour-long seminar on how to take a vacation without my dog. (I still would, actually.) It's never too early to start preparing for time away, but a lot of pet owners don't realize that.

"I had one client who never left the dog, and then her mother died," McConnell says. "What? She's not going to go to her mother's funeral? She had to leave two days after I saw her. We had no time to work on it."

It's helpful for pet owners to learn that as soon as they bring a dog into their home, they can start working to prepare the pup (and themselves) for time apart.

Right off the bat, owners can practice leaving and coming back for longer and longer periods of time. "Even a new dog who's very healthy and stable," McConnell says, "I still want to work them up slowly to getting used to absences."

This truly is training for everyone. If you have ever felt the heartache of witnessing your dog bark, howl, whimper, and pace until you come back home to her (or come out of the bathroom), you can imagine what a relief it is to me now that when I leave home, Emma quietly digs into some KONGs and then curls up for a nap.

Some owners don't know how to read their dog's stress indicators (see: above) and what to do when they occur. If the dog starts to whine when an owner grabs his keys or puts on his coat, for example, you could work with him to vary departure cues. By doing so, you can help your clients catch signs of impending separation anxiety before it ever develops.

Have a discussion about that gift of giving our dogs coping skills. Work with your clients on providing a safe place — a crate, a mat, a bed — where their dog can relax at home and have some independence. Emma now has a bed where she is learning to stay whether I'm in the room or not. She's often contented to relax there rather than my lap, even when I sit on a nearby chair.

Also, help your clients develop a travel plan long before they ever need or want to leave town. Where will the dog stay when they are away? Is this a dog who is happier in a room full of other dogs at a boarding facility or does he prefer to be alone on his favorite couch at home?

If owners plan to keep their dog at home, will they have a pet sitter stay overnight? How many visits will he need each day? What type of instructions do they need to impart to the pet sitter? (McConnell writes an "eight-page, single-spaced set of instructions" for her pet sitter, she says. Mine runs about three pages.)

Of course, the best pet sitter in the world, or most heavenly doggy bed and breakfast, will likely not appease Princess if she has always been glued to the owner's side.

When Rachil first opened her home-based doggy daycare and boarding business, a client left his three Schnoodles with her while he and his wife went away on vacation for ten days. "He never told me that it was the first time in six years that they were leaving the dogs," Rachil says. "Those dogs had such severe textbook separation anxiety. They were destroying my house, peeing, pooing, constant howling all night. It was horrible."

Rachil learned her lesson, and since then she has made it a practice to ask new clients if their dogs have been away from them before and how they handled it. She also counsels clients on ways to give their dogs more independence so that they can cope whenever their human does go away.

Of course, even if the dogs can handle our departures, that doesn't guarantee it will be easy for us to say farewell. During a four-day trip to Florida last year, Rachil's two Pomeranians stayed with a woman who also boards dogs in her home. "The boys had a great time, but I was miserable," says Rachil. "I was lying at the pool thinking, 'Oh God, I wish I could be walking the dogs on the beach with me.' I missed them so much."

McConnell doesn't travel as much as she used to, she says, and missing her dogs is a factor in that decision. "I know when I come home from being gone, the way they greet me, they're clearly over-the-moon happy to see me, but I don't have dogs with separation anxiety," she says. "They're fine. I think it's more about me."

Just as we turn to trainers and behavior consultants to help our dogs, owners can reach out for help for themselves as well.

Some psychologists, such as Chicago-based Dr. Harper, specialize in helping people deal with the highs and lows of caring for animals.

"It is in the animal advocate's nature to experience intense feelings for animals," Harper writes in her book *The Power of Joy in Giving to Animals*. "We feel what we think they feel. It's not 'just an animal.' We read pain in their eyes, we interpret their whines and barks and meows. We feel their excitement and we imagine their disappointment," she writes.

Sarah Bartley — rescuer to the two dogs, two horses, and one bearded dragon — does, indeed, feel such intense emotions. She recognized that she was giving all that she had to her animals and not taking enough for herself.

In eight years Bartley has only been back home in England once, and that was a short up-and-back for a death in the family. She has even reduced her hours working at a skydiving business from full time to part time to not leave the dogs alone so long.

"Okay. You're getting kind of crazy," Bartley said to herself last year. "You have to let go a little bit."

So, in May of last year, she made arrangements for someone to care for her animals and headed out to Kanab, Utah. She and about a dozen others attended the three-day Giving Hearts Retreat, led by Harper and Maloney at the Best Friends Animal Society.

Most people attend the retreat to deal with burnout and grief, Maloney says. For one obvious reason, people with anxiety about leaving their animals don't often make it there, she says.

That is part of the reason she and Harper produced *The Power of Joy in Giving to Animals*. "It's something we did specifically to help all the people who, because of the nature of the condition, are not going to leave home to get the help they need," says Maloney. "This is a way we hope we're reaching those people."

The mere act of traveling to the retreat could, in some cases, give people the nudge they need to be able to go away again.

"A good first step is to travel to a dog behavior or training seminar," McConnell says. Concerned owners can justify leaving the pup at home, because they are going to learn something that will benefit him. After returning home to a happy and healthy dog (assuming all goes well), they just might feel confident enough to try traveling again.

But for some — even when they know that their dogs can handle their absences and will receive great care while they're gone — parting can still be such sweet sorrow.

"When we drive away and go down the driveway, and I look back, and there's my little farmhouse with my little

dogs inside," she says, "sometimes I admit to getting tears in my eyes."

So for the really rough times, what does McConnell do? She turns to good ol' classical conditioning for some help.

"I will eat chocolate," McConnell says. "I literally give myself chocolate. Never, never, ever, ever dismiss the power of chocolate."

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Tracy Krulik writes for publications including The Washington Post and RewireMe.com. She is a student in the Raising Canine professional dog trainer program so that she can help other rescue pups — like her beagle Emma — adjust to life-after-shelter. Tracy is proud to say that she and Emma are spending more and more time apart, and both are handling it beautifully. Tracy can be reached at www.tracykrulik.com.