Separation anxiety in dogs: the implications of predictability and contextual fear for behavioural treatment

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Abstract

Separation anxiety (SA) is one of the most common canine behaviour problems and can have serious negative effects on dog welfare. Treatment of SA may include changing the environment around the dog, pharmacological treatment and behavioural therapy. The latter is considered the most important part of the treatment and is intended to habituate the dog to being alone and to reduce its dependence on the owner. The objective of this paper is to discuss two aspects of the treatment of SA that may be in contradiction with our current understanding of the stress response. Advice commonly given to owners of dogs with SA includes giving false departure cues to prevent the dog from anticipating the actual departure. Instead, we recommend increasing the predictability of the owner’s departure by maintaining the cues that signal it. Animals suffering from anxiety disorders are likely to develop contextual fear, ie to be frightened by merely being exposed to the same location where they have experienced an aversive event. As a consequence, we suggest that whenever possible, fake departures done as part of the habituation exercises to being left are done in a place different from that where the dog is actually left alone.

Keywords: animal welfare, contextual fear, dog, predictability, separation anxiety, stress

Introduction

Separation anxiety (SA) or separation distress is one of the most common canine behaviour problems (McGrave 1991; Overall 2001, 2013; Bradshaw et al 2002; APBC 2005), accounting for 15% of canine behavioural cases seen by general practitioners and up to 20-40% of canine cases seen by behaviourists (Borchelt & Voith 1982; Mugford 1995). SA has a strong negative effect on animal welfare as it causes chronic stress (Dreschel 2010), and is associated with negative cognitive bias (Mendl et al 2010). Additionally, SA has negative consequences on the human-animal bond that may lead to owner relinquishment of healthy dogs or a decision to seek euthanasia (Salman et al 1998).

Typically, dogs with SA vocalise, eliminate and/or show destructive behaviour in the owner’s absence or when the dog does not have direct contact with the owner (Borchelt & Voith 1982; Pageat 1998; Flannigan & Dodman 2001; Overall 2013). Although these signs are the most apparent and annoying for the owners, dogs with SA can also show other signs such as anorexia or changes in activity level when left alone (Simpson 2000; Overall et al 2001; Appleby & Pluijmakers 2003; Blackwell et al 2006; Sherman & Mills 2008).

Treatment of SA includes making changes to the dog’s environment (mainly to increase the dog’s level of stimulation through play and physical exercise, among other strategies), pharmacological treatment to reduce the anxiety level of the dog and behavioural therapy. The latter is considered the most important part of the treatment and has two main objectives: to habituate the dog to being alone and to reduce its dependence on the owner (Takeuchi et al 2000; Horwitz 2002; Bowen & Heath 2005; Sherman & Mills 2008; Butler et al 2011).

The objective of this paper is to discuss some of the elements that are commonly included in the behavioural therapy of dogs with SA and that may be in contradiction with our current understanding of the stress response. In particular, we will focus on the ability of dogs with SA to predict the owner’s departure and on the role of contextual fear in the treatment of SA.

Predictability of the owner’s departure

It has been suggested that one of the factors contributing to the anxiety response of dogs with SA is their anticipation of the owner’s departure, which is based on the dog having learnt the association between the actual departure and several cues that precede it and that are given by the owner, often unconsciously, eg picking up house keys, putting on coat. One piece of advice commonly given to owners of dogs with separation anxiety is, therefore, to give false departure cues, ie to behave as if they were about to leave