

# Canine Separation Anxiety: A Case Study

Article by Dr. Jeff Nichol, DVM



Dogs are best friends for a whole lot of us for some really strong reasons. They're always delighted to see us, they'll follow us anywhere, and they'd never run off with somebody else. Those traits are hard to find in another person.

So what can a pet parent do if the dog who has stolen their heart damages their house while they're away? Dogs with separation anxiety can be hyper-attached causing them to freak-out when home alone. It's more than frustrating; this severe behavior disorder can damage or even break the bond they've built with their beloved friend.

I've dealt with hundreds of dogs with separation anxiety. It's the second most common canine behavioral condition.<sup>1</sup> (Aggression is No.1.) Research has shown that it affects up to 17 percent of dogs in the United States.<sup>2,3</sup> Their owners struggle with the daily angst of coming home to face, well, sometimes hundreds of dollars of damage. They need help right now. Reconcile®, a chewable, FDA-approved brand of fluoxetine, is the antianxiety medication that can make the difference. It certainly did for Ruby.

This well-loved dog was a 2-year-old Australian shepherd when she was adopted by Susan and Pat. Ruby immediately attached herself to her new family. They described her as sweet, loving and well-mannered. There was no history of why she'd been surrendered to the shelter but it didn't take long for them to deduce the cause.

When alone at home during her first two months, Ruby had torn her way out of two crates, dug through the carpet all the way to the concrete, destroyed doors and ripped down window blinds. Pat told me she could "do \$1,000 of damage in no time." She couldn't get out of the house but, if left outside, she escaped the fenced yard. Susan and Pat were making plans to raise the wall that surrounded their half-acre property in order to make it "escape-proof".

Videos of dogs with separation anxiety provide clear evidence of overwhelming panic. Our job is to diagnose, explain the cause, and get treatment started. I told Susan and Pat that, rather than investing in escape-proof crates

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

and fences, they needed to take control of Ruby's anxiety. I made it clear that these can be tough problems but we have research-based solutions.

Behavior cases, including separation anxiety, should have all possible physical issues identified and managed at the get-go. I started Ruby's evaluation with a thorough exam and lab profile. Not surprisingly, with her history of frantic escape attempts, she had a fractured upper canine tooth with an exposed root canal. I referred that challenge to a veterinary dental specialist.

It's essential for dogs like this to become less anxious and more relaxed in their owners' absence.<sup>4</sup> With a clean bill of health, I outlined a treatment plan that included fluoxetine. (Reconcile<sup>®</sup> wasn't available.) There was no time wasted in changing Susan's and Pat's management methods either. Dogs like Ruby do much better when behavior modification is implemented along with antianxiety treatment.

I kindly but firmly informed them that crating was no longer an option. I told Susan and Pat that when they didn't have an alternative to leaving Ruby home alone, she needed choices. A dog door would make it possible for her to move about freely. I also told them that their girl would benefit from the predictability of a canine-specific structure. They were to completely ignore as they prepared to leave, walked out their door, and returned. I explained that quiet reinforcement for calmer behavior would help their operant learner to catch on.

Dogs with separation behaviors can redirect their attention away from wringing their paws if they are set up to succeed. Ruby could stay engaged in the innate behavior of foraging, extracting her nutrition exclusively from food-dispensing toys and puzzles. She would learn by repetition that as her reliable leaders left in the morning, her opportunity to eat would be dropped on the floor. Ruby soon focused her brain, paws and mouth on prying loose her sustenance.

Behavior modification plus effective antianxiety treatment are essential to a good prognosis.<sup>4</sup> FDA-approved Reconcile produced specifically for dogs is back on the market. Reconcile with behavior modification shortens the time to improvement compared to behavior modification alone. The most common side effects are decreased appetite, depression/lethargy, shaking/shivering/tremors and

vomiting. For more information about Reconcile safety and effectiveness, see the full product label at [Reconcile.com](http://Reconcile.com).

A 3–4 week delay in the onset of medication effectiveness was expected with Ruby's treatment. To make this period easier, I urged her folks to drop her off at a doggy daycare facility on their way to work for the first month. By getting their dog started on foraging from food toys while they were home with her, Ruby transitioned well. Once the whole family was in step with their new daily routine, and with Ruby's anxiety improved, she did much better.

Susan and Pat reported that Ruby was focused on her food-dispensing toys and puzzles as they walked away in the morning and that they were no longer assaulted with over-the-top exuberance when they returned home. Their house was no longer getting trashed and, best of all, their dog's quality of life had improved significantly.

Thorough medicine can make winners of everybody. Pet parents who see results like this keep their dogs, and their veterinarians get to hold onto their patients.

#### References:

- <sup>1</sup> Simpson BS, Landsberg GM, Reisner IR, et al. Effects of Reconcile (fluoxetine) chewable tablet plus behavior management for canine separation anxiety. *Vet Ther.* 2007;8(1):18-31.
- <sup>2</sup> Bamberger M, Houpt KA. Signalment factors, comorbidity, and trends in behavior diagnoses in dogs: 1,644 cases (1991-2001). *JAVMA.* 2006;229(10):1593.
- <sup>3</sup> Tiira K, Sulkama S, Lohi H. Prevalence, comorbidity, and behavioral variation in canine anxiety. *J Vet Behav.* 2016;16:38.
- <sup>4</sup> Schwartz S. Separation anxiety syndrome in dogs and cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 2003;22(11):1526-1532.
- <sup>5</sup> Elanco Animal Health. Field study T8E420001. Efficacy Evaluation of Fluoxetine (fluoxetine hydrochloride) for the Control of Separation Anxiety in Dogs. Freedom of Information Summary NADA 141-272; Reconcile Fluoxetine Hydrochloride Chewable Tablets: Dogs. 2007: 3.



Jeff Nichol, DVM, majored in zoology as an undergraduate student and attended veterinary school at Michigan State University, completing his veterinary medical degree in 1974. Dr. Nichol was a hospital owner from 1978–2003. In addition to general medicine and surgery, Dr. Nichol has actively pursued the study of veterinary behavior medicine since 1993. He was co-author of a peer-reviewed scientific article on cognitive dysfunction published in *Veterinary Clinics of North America*. He completed his residency through the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists in 2015. His practice is now limited to the diagnosis and treatment of behavior disorders of pets.