Educating dog owners on separation anxiety is a subject that many dog trainers are addressing now. It is a legitimate concern when we are able to go back to our”normal” ways of life. The past couple of Training tips for Tuesday we have been sharing some thoughts and ideas on how to transition your dog from always having someone with him, to when there will be noone at home for many hours. Here are some more avenues to explore to help this transition.

1. Crate train your dog. A crate is an excellent option for anxiety relief because it creates a cozy den for your dog. It will be most effective if you take the time to teach you dog that their crate is a safe haven and not just where they are sent to punish bad behavior or to stay when you leave. The dog’s crate should be his happy place. I always say a cue for my dogs to go in the crate, such as “Bed” or “Crate” and when they go in the crate they are rewarded with some treats or a Stuffed Kong filled with treats. This is done every time they are asked to go in the crate. Start practicing when you are taking a shower, getting the mail, leaving the house briefly, etc. Eventually add more time for the dog to be crated.
2. Exercise your dog well before you leave. A tired dog has less energy with which to be anxious and destructive. Make sure you complete this 20-30 minutes before you leave.
3. Practice a gradual departure from your dog by starting at a few seconds to building it up 5 minute intervals. You can start by being in different parts of your house to actually leaving your house.
4. Daily training sessions will help to build your dog’s confidence.  Have at least one or two five-minute training sessions every day where you work on basic commands (sit, down, come, stay) and/or tricks (spin, shake, speak, roll-over).  Remember – training should ALWAYS be positive, especially with anxious dogs.  Use food treats as rewards (not as bribes).  Performing behaviors on cue for food treats is a great way to build self-confidence in your dog.
5. Consider a highly recommended day care or a dog walker to let them out during the day.
6. Consult with a professional animal behaviorist and/ or veterinarian for help

Avoid punishing your dog…..on the occasion that your dog misbehaves while you’re out, it’s important that you don’t react badly. Your dog will become anxious about what you will do when you return the next time you go out making the anxiety and behavior (like chewing and barking) worse. Dogs that have been yelled at may lower their head, put their ears back and put their tail between their legs. Sadly, owners think that their dog looks guilty because they know they have done wrong. They only see an angry owner at them and they have no idea why. Your dog will simply become more anxious the next time you go out. If you do come home to a mess, it’s essential not to physically punish or shout at your dog. Try to avoid even letting your dog see that you are annoyed and let them outside before cleaning up.