



Does my dog have separation anxiety or not?

What to look out for when trying to identify Separation Anxiety

Ness Jones
Separation Anxiety in Dogs Decoded

nessjones.com

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Separation Anxiety In Dogs Decoded with Ness Jones

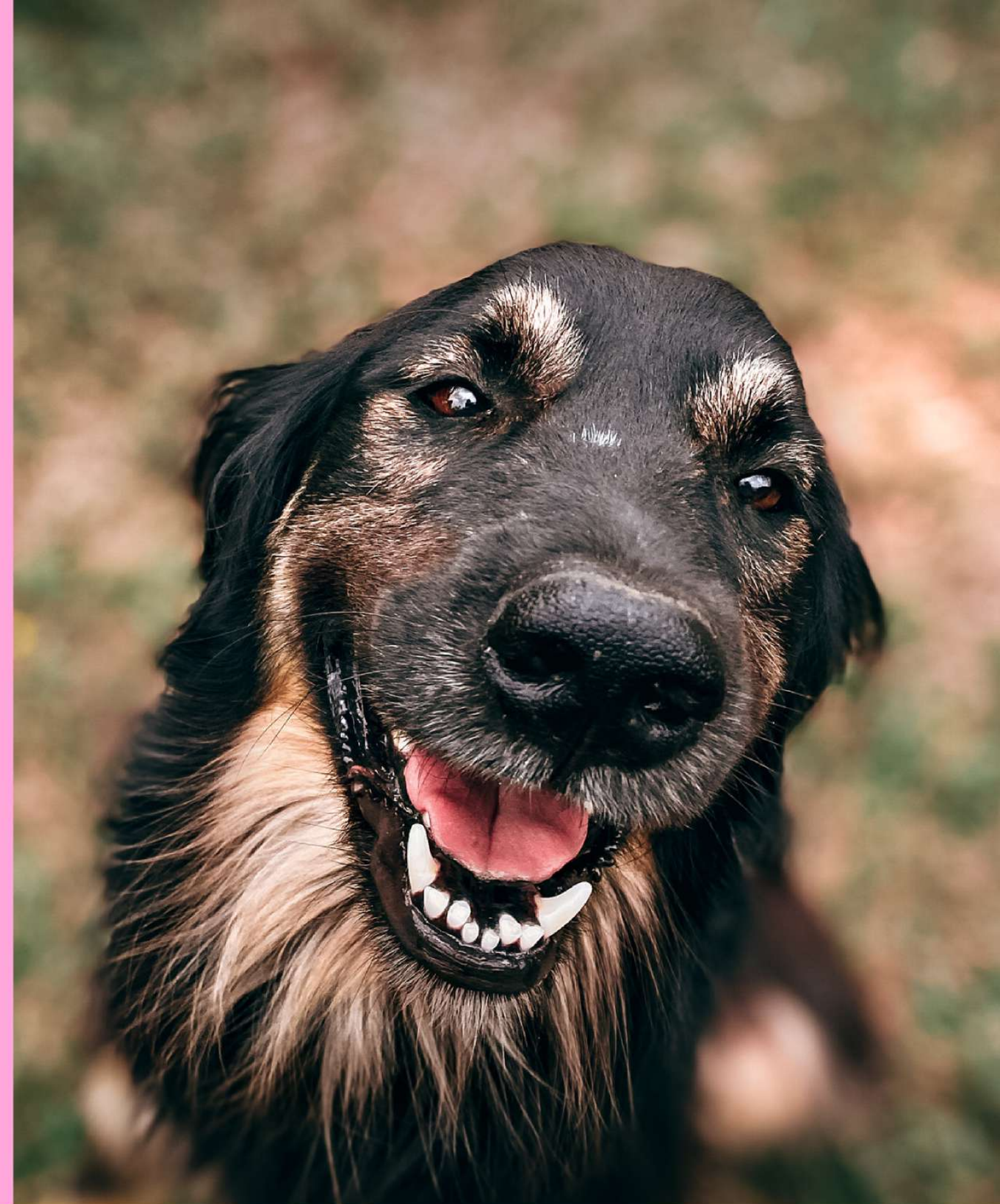
Tailored training that teaches your dog to cope being home alone without freaking out.

About Ness Jones:

Ness is a Certified Separation Anxiety Pro Behavior Consultant (Cert. SAPT) focusing solely on separation anxiety cases.

Ness helps dogs learn to cope when home alone without stress or panic, giving their dog guardians their lives back and the ability to walk out the door without guilt or worry about what will happen.

Her programs provide tailor-made structured plans for her clients around the world so they no longer have to question their next step.



Firstly let's examine the toll that having a dog with separation anxiety can have on your life ...




Having a dog with separation anxiety is not easy

It can impact your life in many different ways and I feel it's important to examine these in totality to get a clear perspective of all the issues.

It's not just about seeing your dog panic when it is left alone. It's not just about the guilt you feel every time to walk out the door knowing they are going to have a meltdown. Or worrying that they will destroy your belongings or soil in the house.

It's so much much more than that. So let's delve into what these impacts are and how they affect not just the dog but also the dog guardian ...

A beagle dog is sitting on the left side of the image, looking up towards a purple circle. The dog has brown, black, and white fur. There are four purple circles of varying shades at the top of the image. A horizontal purple line is positioned below the circles and above the text.

IMPACT I: Physically

Believe it or not, having a dog with separation anxiety can actually take a physical toll on your body.

- Does it keep you up at night worrying about your dog and what you are going to do to help them?
 - Are you losing sleep due to stress?
 - Are you feeling anxious, guilty, remorseful?

All these things can lead to toxic or chronic stress and this can have an impact on our health down the track - and this doesn't even include the stress your dog is going through each time they are left alone.

IMPACT 2: Financially

Then we have the Financial Impact ...

What are you spending your money on?

If you have a dog with separation anxiety, one of the first steps to start resolving it is to never let your dog go "over threshold" (ie into a panic) as this undermines the training process. To do this, I suggest your dog is never left alone unless you are training them with "safe" absences. And that means, finding cover for your dog while you are out.

This, of course, can come at a financial cost (unless you have friends & family prepared to mind them). It might include a dog walker, pet sitter or doggy daycare.

Financial Impacts continued ...



Other financial outlays might include replacing items your dog destroyed when it was left alone. These can include personal belongings but also destruction of the environment such as walls and doors - particularly around exit points.

Some dog guardians do not feel comfortable working full time, as it means leaving their dog for periods of time longer than what they can cope with ... but that also means their finances are limited.

Further, some neighbors fed up with barking dogs complain to local councils, and this can potentially lead to fines due to noise complaints.

IMPACT 3: Emotional

The Emotional Impact ...

Unfortunately, when you have a dog with separation anxiety it can put an undue strain on relationships. Some partners want to, dare I say it?, "Get rid of the dog" or don't want to outlay the cost of pet sitters or doggy daycare. Alternatively, they might not want to put the work into doing the training. In fact, maybe they would prefer to leave the dog at home alone to panic and have a meltdown.

Or maybe family and friends think you value your dog over them because you keep cancelling social engagements when you can't find someone to look after your best buddy.

Perhaps it's a breakdown in your formerly friendly relationship with your neighbors who are fed up listening to your dog bark, howl and cry.

And, of course, there's those nagging feelings of guilt you get when you have to leave your dog.

All these take an emotional toll on you and leave you feeling down and out with no place to go.



IMPACT 4: Other Impacts



No more spontaneity – the days of popping out for a quick coffee with friends or dinner and a movie with your partner are gone



Freedom – you don't have it



Your life has become a military operation with everything revolving around your dog

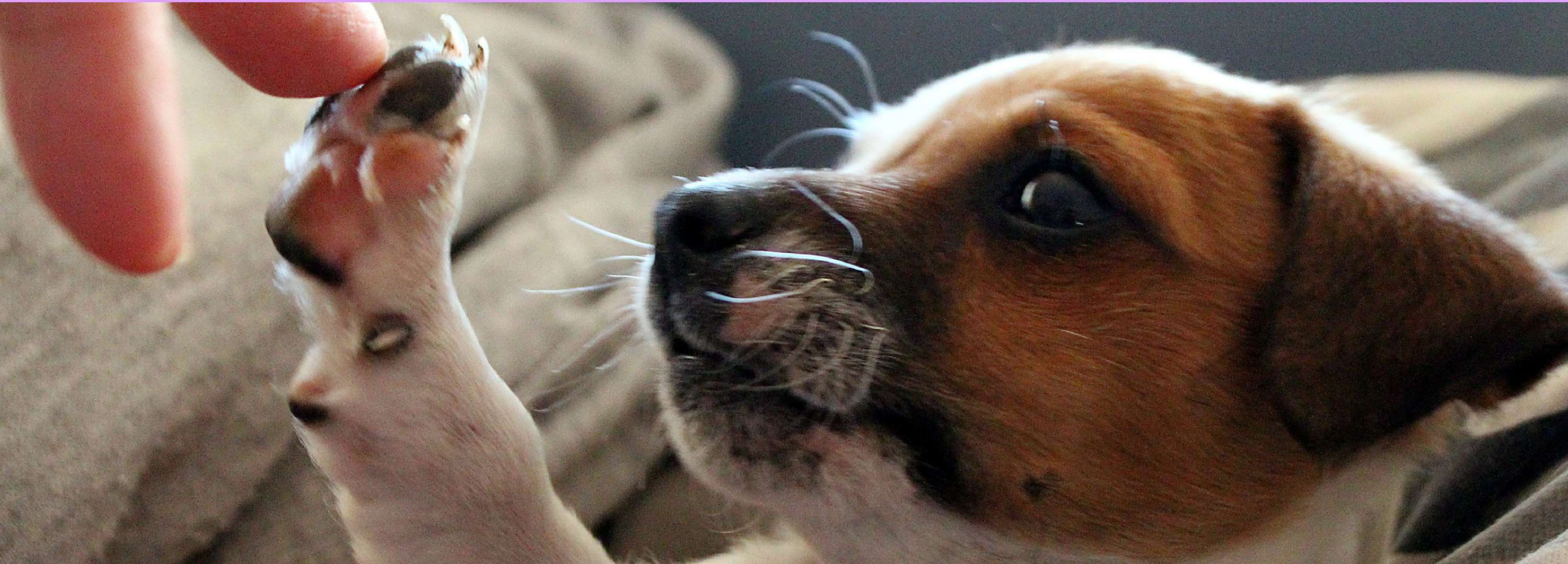


Your dog has become your furry jailer



Does your dog really have separation anxiety?

So we've delved into the impacts of having a dog with separation anxiety, but how do we tell if it really is separation anxiety? What if it is something else? Is it Fear? Is it Frustration? Or could it be FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)?



But first ...

We need to examine the most obvious signs of separation anxiety and what they look like. Most dog guardians already know what they are so I am not going to dwell on them. It is important too to recognize that all dogs display different signs and it is completely individual.



Salivating & Drooling,
panting heavily



Destruction of
belongings



Soiling despite being
house trained



Trembling
uncontrollably



Frantic attempts to
escape, sometimes to
the point of self-harm



Excessive barking,
whining, crying, and
howling



Becoming anxious
well before the
guardian leaves



Pacing rapidly between
rooms or freezing like a
statue

Context is Everything



On the next few pages I am going to examine the less subtle signs that a dog might display that could indicate they are feeling unsure, anxious, stressed or are just holding it together.

I really want to note though that just because some of these signs are present, it doesn't mean the dog has separation anxiety.

We have to look at the bigger picture. What is happening in the dog's life that might be an indicator of anxiety or not?

So the question is is it anxiety or is there, another, unrelated, reason they are displaying a certain behavior?

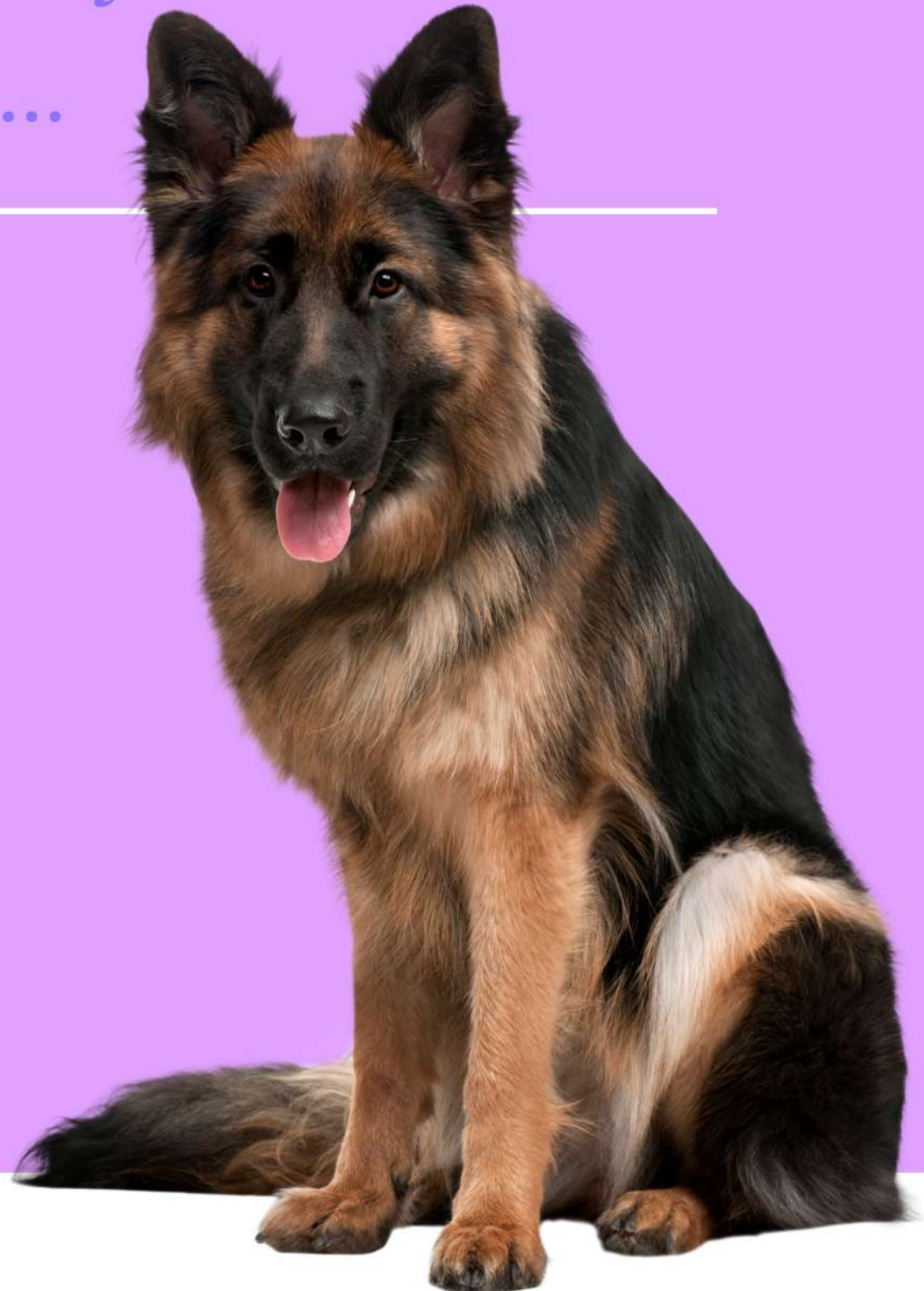
The Less Obvious Signs of Separation Anxiety ...

Note: It is essential to know your dog, observe them and understand what their normal behavior in certain situations is, so you can determine what is out of character and may indicate stress

The following behaviors could be interpreted as stress but there could also be other causes



The Less Obvious signs of stress and what they could mean



Lip Licking

When a dog darts its tongue out, maybe touching its nose, this can certainly be a sign of stress. However, we could also liken it to us poking our tongue out when we are thinking hard about something, concentrating or trying to problem solve. So while we might perceive it as stress, it could also be a sign the dog is processing what is going on. Therefore, we need to take it as a whole and assess whether there are other stress-related signs associated with it.

Yawning

A yawn at times of anxiety or uncertainty is often called a Stress Yawn but also sometimes a Calming Signal (as identified by Turid Rugaas in her book *On Talking Terms With Dogs: Calming Signals*). If your dog yawns, it could be a sign that it is feeling stressed or is trying to calm itself down BUT, please note: context is extremely important ... did your dog just wake up? is your dog feeling tired? If so, then we don't need to assume or jump to the conclusion that it is stress or anxiety.

Things aren't always what they appear to be ...



Scratching or Licking

When a dog scratches or licks itself, it can sometimes be seen as a displacement behavior, perhaps a sign your dog is feeling unsure about your absence. However, we do need to assess if something else is going on ie does your dog have an itch? does your dog have allergies. Context matters so it is important to know whether your dog is doing this behavior outside of times of potential stress eg when they are just relaxing with you.

Sniffing

Sniffing can also be a displacement behavior and a sign your dog is feeling unsure. However, dogs also tell the time with the amount of odor in the air and it is possible your dog is trying to ascertain how long you have been gone.



Playing

You might consider your dog playing while you are out a good sign and it certainly can be indicating they are relaxed enough to play. It is important to note the intensity of the play however, and whether your dog is downloading stress into a toy. Does the play differ to how your dog plays when you are there?

Digging

Digging either in the couch or soft furnishings or around the door could be a sign of anxiety. But we do have to recognize if it is because they are downloading stress or if they are simply bored.

Panting

Panting can definitely be a sign of stress, especially if it is accompanied by lots of drooling too. However, as we know it can also be a sign your dog is actually hot or overheated. Is it a hot day or is the heating turned up too high? Has your dog just been playing or running around?

The Shake-off

This is similar to when a dog gets out of water or has just had a bath and they shake-off. Yes, it can be a sign of stress but dogs will often do it when they have been napping and just woken up or been lying down and stand up. In that context it is not stress-related. When it is associated with anxiety, I liken the shake-off to us shrugging our shoulders to release tension and would look for other signs of stress in conjunction with it.

Stretching

Again, dogs often do this when they have just woken up or been resting and in this context it is not a cause for concern. However, if it is associated with other signs of stress it could be an indicator your dog is feeling uncomfortable. I liken it to us stretching our muscles when we are feeling tension and want to release it, eg in the waiting room of the dentist office.

Other Signs which are (generally) stress, anxiety, or even fear

Tail tucked/flattened ears; Hiding; Freezing; Wide (whale) eyes



The Questions We Need To Ask ...



Are there other things that are affecting your dog that are creating the appearance of separation anxiety?

When determining whether a dog has separation anxiety, we must look at all aspects of its life. And we have to ask the question, what else is going on that might look like separation anxiety but actually isn't, and what can we do to address it?

In the next pages, I'll be examining circumstances that might impact your dog's ability to be home alone and what you could potentially change up to help them cope better.

What should you look out for?



Is your dog in a new environment?

Dogs are creatures of routine and can sometime struggle when we change things up. If you have moved home with your dog, they might need some settling in time before you leave them. This could be a few days or it could be a few weeks. It depends on the dog. And the first time you do leave them, ensure you are nearby and watching on a live video feed to monitor them.

Is the dog away from home in a new place eg on holidays or staying at a friends?

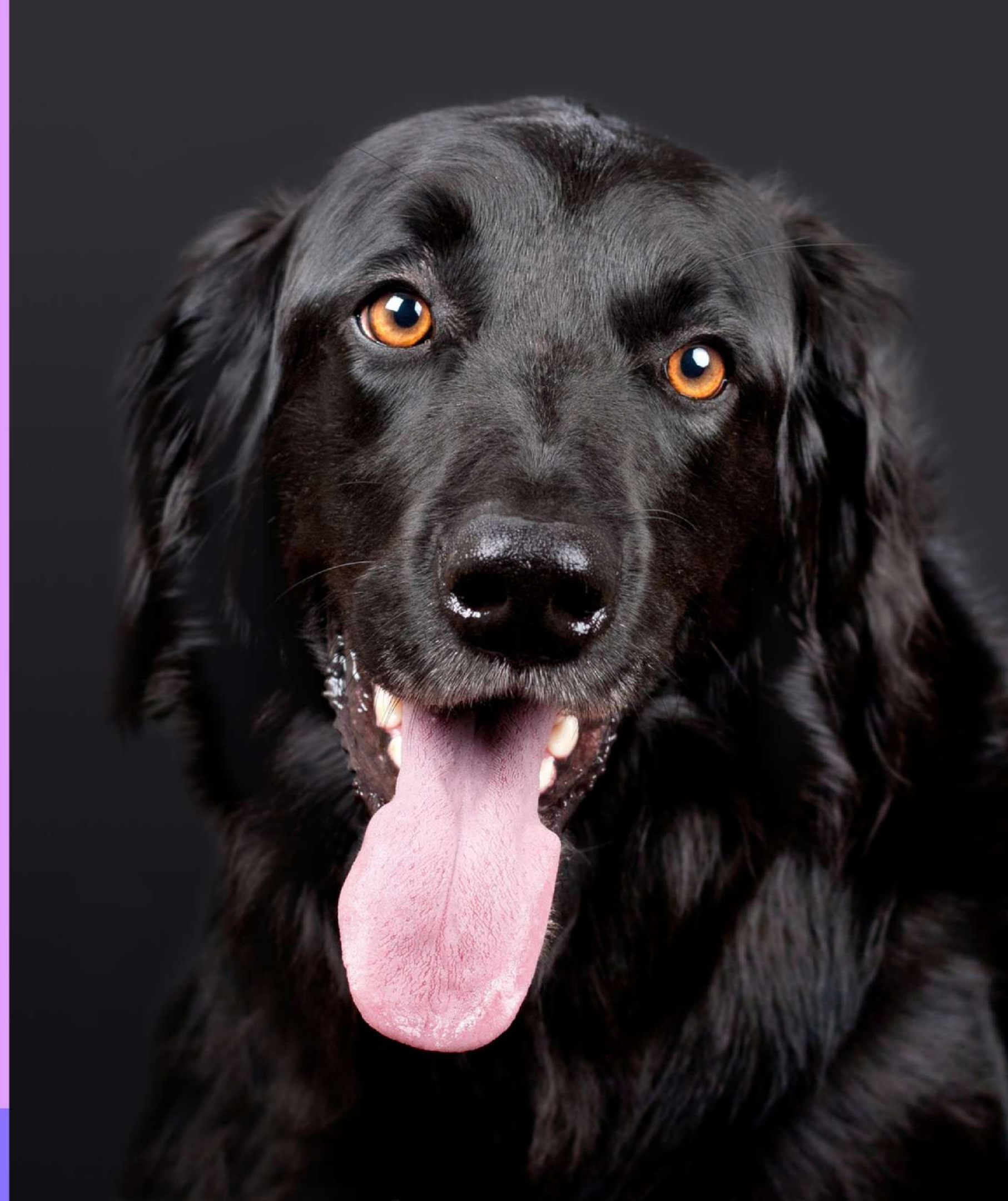
Dogs don't generalize well, meaning what they can do in one place, they may not be able to do in another. If you are on holidays, for example, don't expect your dog to be able to cope if you leave them alone. Give them a chance to feel comfortable in their new surroundings first.

Does the guardian work from home?

If a dog gets used to having you around all the time, it can be tricky for them when you walk out the door. Even if you do work from home, it's important to give your dog some time alone - in a safe manner where they never go over threshold into panic.

Has Covid-19 lockdowns played a role?

Even some dogs who were fine pre-lockdown, have found it difficult being at home alone after their guardians have returned to the workplace or school etc. It's even harder for those dogs who were adopted during the lockdowns as they have never really learnt what it means to be alone. This is where separation anxiety desensitization and gradual exposure therapy training is extremely important to teach them it is not scary when their caregiver leaves.





Is there a new person / pet in the house or someone leaving?

New inhabitants in the house can really throw your dog off their game and they can feel unsettled with the change. The same applies to someone leaving the household ie child leaving for college, relationship breakdown or a death in the family. This can apply to people as well as other pets. Give your dog time to adjust and take things slowly.

Are there new neighbors / workmen nearby?

New neighbors or workmen in an adjoining property can make your dog unsettled. Be aware of this and give them time to adjust to what is going on.

What about the age of your dog?



Puppies

Puppies are really like babies and shouldn't be alone for extended periods of time without some sort of training done first. They have been removed from all they have known and bond quickly with their new caregivers. It's normal for them to want to be with you.

Teenagers / adolescents

Just because a teenage dog undertakes unwanted behaviors while you are out, we don't necessarily have to attribute that to separation anxiety. Young dogs have lots of energy and often don't know what to do with it. Have they had enough exercise and enrichment to help them be calm and rest while you are gone?

Seniors / Health Issues

Is your dog a senior suffering from cognitive decline? Were they okay previously? Are the separation-related behaviors a sudden onset? Are there other health issues ie pain, allergies, generalized anxiety? A vet visit is recommended to rule these out.

So What Else?

Did your dog have a bad experience that day?

Sometimes if something happens that your dog perceives as bad eg dog fight, vet visit, groomers it can impact their ability to cope at home alone. If this is the case, try to find cover for them if you have to go out while the cortisol leaves their system.

Is your dog over stimulated?

Dogs sometimes have so much fun or take part in so many activities, it can actually cause them to become over-stimulated, making it hard for them to cope when you walk out the door. Teaching them to calm themselves will help.

Has your dog had enough sleep?

Dogs can sleep between 14 and 17 hours a day, depending on the dog itself, and lack of sleep can make it difficult to rest when left alone. Think of a toddler's behavior when they are over-tired. Make sure you give your dog some calm time to help with this.



Has your dog had enough exercise / enrichment?

As addressed with teenage dogs, if yours hasn't had enough exercise and enrichment, it's possible they will act out when home alone. Exercise and enrichment are core pillars of home alone training.

Does your dog have containment phobia?

Many dogs have what is akin to claustrophobia. While they may be okay in a crate or kennel while you are there, they may experience extreme fear in one when you walk out the door. Many dogs do better left outside the crate / kennel when they are alone simply because they are not contained. Did you know that several European countries have actually banned crates unless there is a medical issue that requires one?

Is your dog a rescue and been through multiple homes?

Rescues who have been through multiple homes can certainly suffer panic and fear when left alone. It's important to make them feel comfortable and help them learn through training that it actually is okay and you will be coming back.



In Conclusion

Having a dog with separation anxiety can make you feel like a prisoner in your own home. But it's important to know WHY your dog is reacting badly to home alone time. If we understand this, we have a chance to help them learn it's okay when you walk out the door.

But it is also essential to recognize that not all separation-related behaviors are based in anxiety and, in fact, can be attributed to a number of other issues that, once addressed, lead to a happy dog that simply relaxes on the couch when alone.

Dogs that do fly into a panic, will only feel better if they learn about safe absences through gradual exposure therapy and desensitization. I help dogs learn to cope when home alone without stress or panic, in a kind gentle way, to give you your life back and the ability to walk out the door without guilt or worry about whether your dog will be okay. I work remotely with my clients offering programs that provide tailor-made structured plans so they no longer have to question their next step or feel held captive by a furry jailer.



Do you want to learn more
about my programs?

Book a free 30-minute Zoom call at
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