BEHAVIOR

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

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Separation anxiety is a behavioral disorder displayed by an animal when it is separated from a particular owner or from any person.[1,2] Separation anxiety behaviors can be displayed externally (e.g., destruction, urination, defecation, vocalization) and/or internally (e.g., depression, inappetence). Common differentials and/or comorbid diagnoses for individual signs include generalized anxiety, other anxieties (e.g., noise phobia), territorial or fear-related aggression, incomplete housetraining, confinement anxiety, and lack of environmental stimulation (boredom).[3-5] Underlying physiologic problems, such as gastrointestinal disorders, can also be comorbid with separation anxiety.

It is imperative that the owner records a video of the dog when alone; most often, the dog will display the behaviors shortly after being left alone.[6] Owner and neighbor observations (e.g., frequent barking) can raise the index of suspicion but may reflect the dog's responses to external stimuli (e.g., watching squirrels).

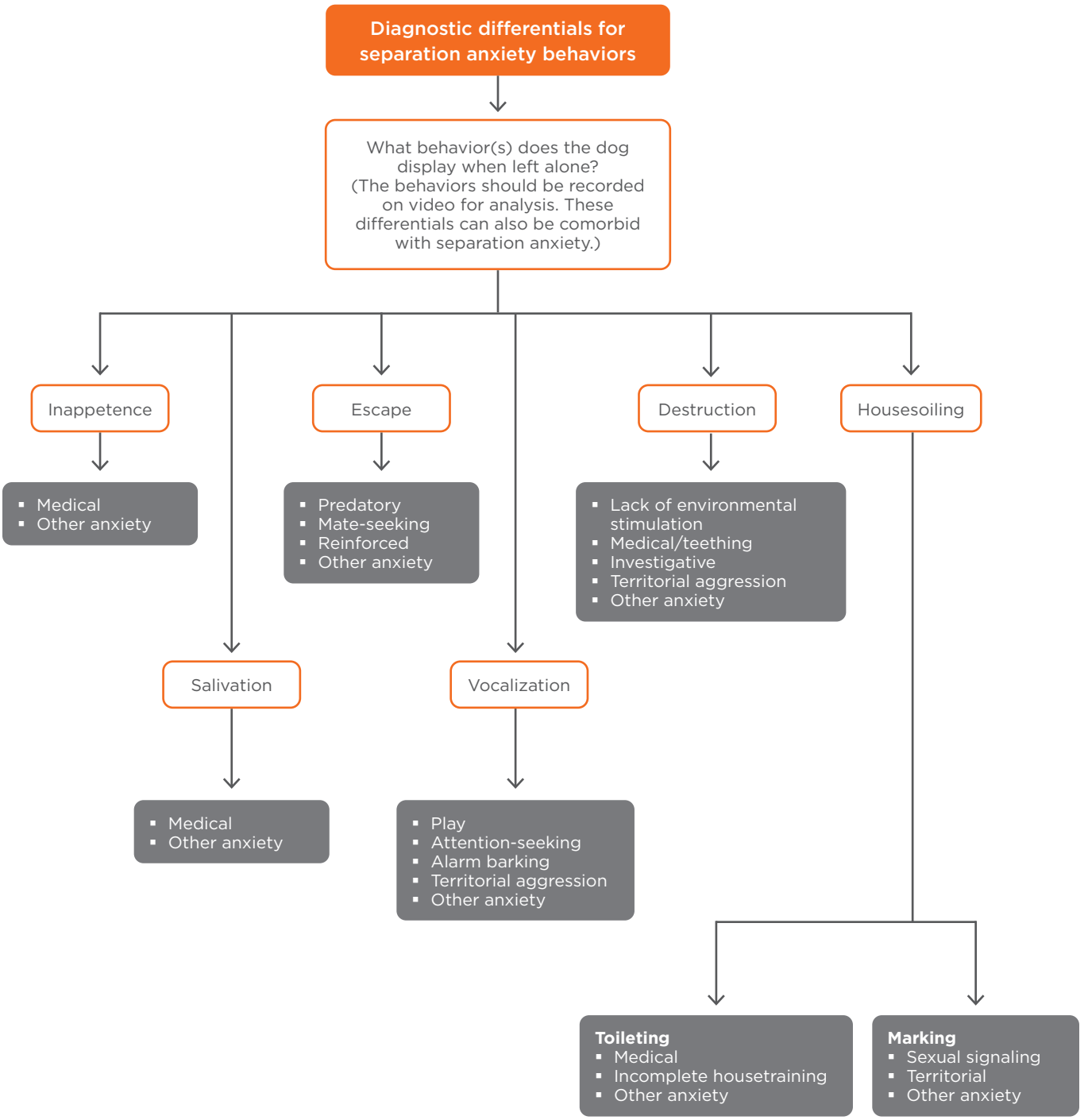
Treatment involves a 5-step plan. *Management* is modifying the environment so that the dog is not exposed to the triggers causing anxiety, as well as managing medical conditions. *Social communication/cues* are relationship-building exercises that lay the foundation for future behavior modification. *Tools* are objects that help facilitate any part of the behavior modification plan.[7,8] *Desensitization and counterconditioning* is the systematic and gradual (re)exposure of the dog to the triggers that cause anxiety, with use of techniques to help change the dog's emotional response.[9-12] *Medications* are used to lower overall anxiety, as well as to address immediate needs (**TABLE 1**).[13-17] Owners should prepare for departure by dosing medications earlier than typically thought of—up to 2 hours before departure—as the onset to action of quicker-to-onset medications can be prolonged. Reconcile (fluoxetine hydrochloride; PRN Pharmacal, prnpharmacal.com), Clomicalm (clomipramine hydrochloride; Virbac, us.virbac.com), and CaniQuell (clomipramine hydrochloride; MWI Animal Health, mwiah.com) are FDA-approved medications to treat separation anxiety in dogs.

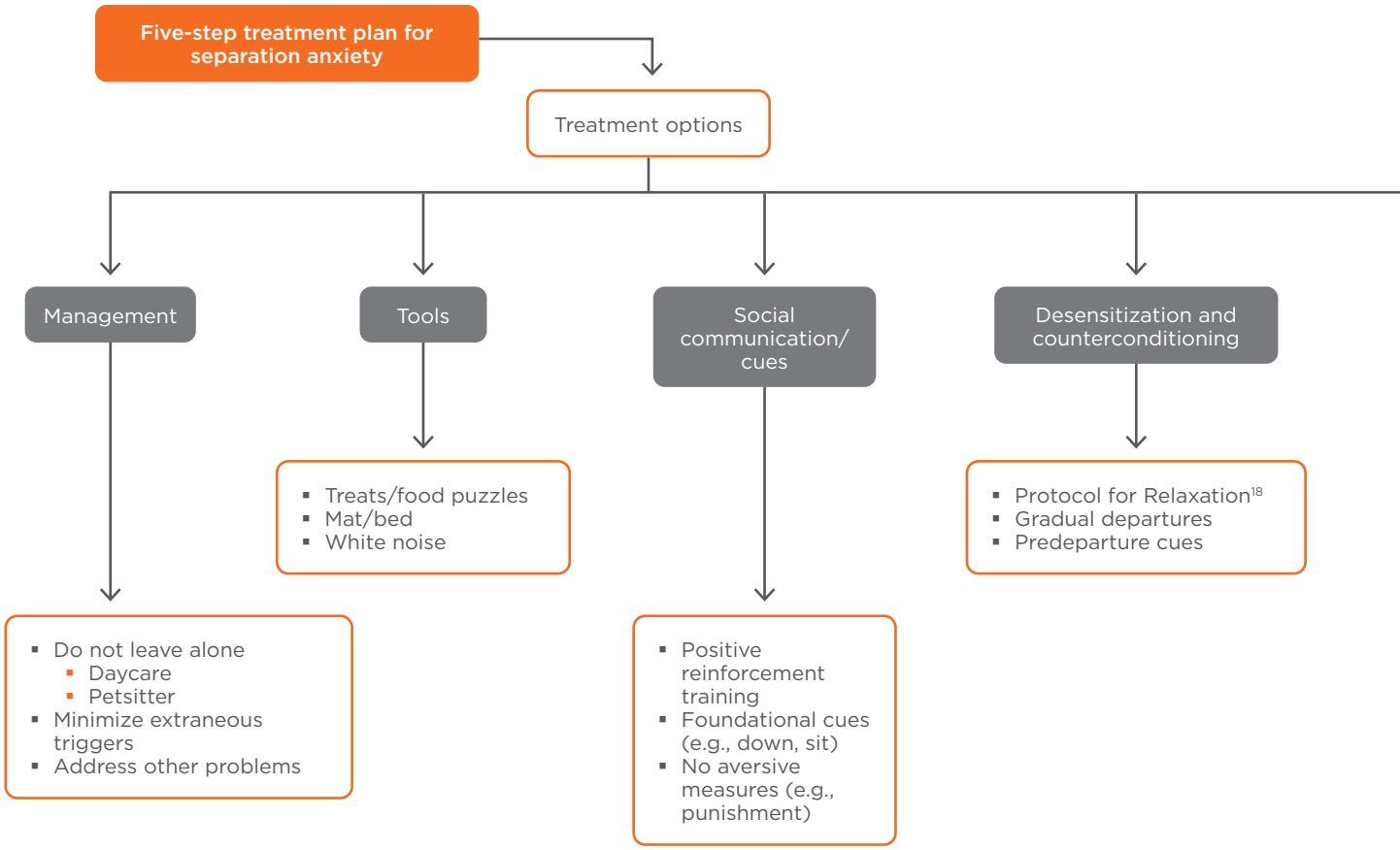
Treating separation anxiety can be difficult. Veterinarians should ask owners about their pet's behavior at every visit to identify problems early, when management and treatment are easier and less distressing for both owner and dog.

TABLE 1 Medications Used in Canine Separation Anxiety Treatment

MEDICATION	DOSE
QUICKER-TO-ONSET MEDICATIONS	
Gabapentin*	10–50 mg/kg q8–12h PRN
Trazodone	5–10 mg/kg q8–12h PRN
Clonidine	0.01–0.05 mg/kg q8–12h PRN
Alprazolam	0.05–0.1 mg/kg q8–12h PRN
Diazepam	0.5–2 mg/kg q8–12h PRN
SEROTONIN-ENHANCING MEDICATIONS	
Fluoxetine (Reconcile; PRN Pharmacal, reconcile.com)	1–2 mg/kg q24h
Clomipramine (Clomicalm [Virbac, us.virbac.com], CaniQuell [MWI Animal Health, mwiah.com])	2–4 mg/kg q24h, or split q12h
Sertraline	1–3 mg/kg q24h
Paroxetine	1–2 mg/kg q24h

**Pregabalin is also approved for use in cats; however, it is a controlled substance in some states.*


Diagnostic differentials for separation anxiety behaviors
What behavior(s) does the dog display when left alone? (The behaviors should be recorded on video for analysis. These differentials can also be comorbid with separation anxiety.)
Inappetence
Medical
Other anxiety
Escape
Predatory
Mate-seeking
Reinforced
Other anxiety
Destruction
Lack of environmental stimulation
Medical/teething
Investigative
Territorial aggression
Other anxiety
Housesoiling
Salivation
Medical
Other anxiety
Vocalization
Play
Attention-seeking
Alarm barking
Territorial aggression
Other anxiety
Toileting
Medical
Incomplete housetraining
Other anxiety
Marking
Sexual signaling
Territorial
Other anxiety



SSRI = selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor; TCA = tricyclic antidepressant

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Melissa Bain

Dr. Bain is a professor of clinical animal behavior and is board certified by both the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (ACVB) and the American College of Animal Welfare (ACAW). She is a past president of both the ACVB and the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior and is currently on the board of the ACAW. In 2016, she was selected as the AVMA Bustad Companion Animal Veterinarian of the Year, and she received the WSAVA Companion Animal Welfare Award in 2019.

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Medications

Quicker-to-onset (when other medications have not taken full effect, when additional medications are needed for effect, or with comorbidities):
- Trazodone
- Gabapentin
- Clonidine
- Benzodiazepines

Slower-to-onset
- SSRIs (Reconcile [fluoxetine hydrochloride; PRN Pharmacal, **prnpharmacal.com**])
- TCAs (Clomicalm [clomipramine hydrochloride; Virbac, **us.virbac.com**], CaniQuell [clomipramine hydrochloride; MWI Animal Health, **mwiah.com**])

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