



Home Alone | Helping your pet thrive during the 9-to-5

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

Sitting in the veterinarian's office with a chubby golden retriever by his side, Gene Benard felt guilty. "I knew that my dog had a problem, and I knew I owned part of that," says the Ashburnham, Mass., resident.

When he and his wife got Remy as a puppy five years ago, they walked the dog before and after work, and they regularly took him to a park where he ran and romped with a Doberman pal. And the happy-go-lucky pooch got a midday bathroom break when their son came home

from school. Although the schedule wasn't perfect, it seemed to work.

Then two years ago, new jobs added 1½ hours of commuting time to the couple's workdays. "He saw us less at night, and when I got home I was tired," says Benard. Remy's walks grew shorter, his playtime became less frequent, and he began packing on the pounds. The family's four cats provided little company for the household's sole canine.

As the days wore on, Remy began

compulsively licking his front paws furless—almost to the point of bleeding. "The long hours and commute have been tough," Benard says, "and unfortunately Remy has had the burden of some of that."

In our double-income, commuting culture, many pets like Remy spend more time alone than they—or their owners—would like. The resulting loneliness and boredom can trigger problem behaviors as pets act out their frustrations. But even if pets aren't exhibiting obvious signs of unhappiness, that doesn't mean idle time isn't wreaking havoc on their psyches.

"Hypoactivity is a very powerful stressor," says San Diego animal behaviorist Dennis Fetko. "The worst thing you can make [an animal] do is nothing."

MAKE YOUR HOME A HAPPY PLACE

To help stave off the workaday blues, pet owners can provide structures, toys, and activities tailored to the species. Start by evaluating your home from your pet's perspective, says Dr. Nicholas Dodman, a veterinary behaviorist with Tufts University in Massachusetts; simple changes can make the space more interesting and enjoyable. Create a cozy den with an open crate, and arrange special resting zones throughout the house fashioned from toys and pillows. For cats, window perches, scratching posts, and climbing opportunities encourage natural behaviors and keep them in shape.

Safe, confined access to the outdoors can also be a soothing antidote to separation anxiety, as Amy Ippoliti discovered when she moved with her two cats from rural New York to Louisville, Colo., six years ago. Ippoliti often travels all over the world teaching yoga instructors. Although she hired someone to check on the cats twice a day whenever she was away, the move and her random schedule took a toll on Jaya and Stinky. "Jaya started licking himself too much, and he had balding areas on his arms and belly," she says. Territorial conflicts that had long been brewing between the two males began to grow, with 14-year-old Jaya typically besting the elder Stinky.

Ippoliti had an outdoor enclosure built underneath her deck; accessible by a pet door, it features five perches for lounging in shade or sun. “Stinky was like, *Oh, fresh air and sunshine!* He would just be blissed-out when he was out there.” Though people-focused Jaya was less enamored with the new setting, the improvements were still dramatic: He gave up his obsessive grooming, and his fur grew back in.

GO MENTAL

When choosing toys and activities to keep your pets busy while you’re away, Fetko recommends considering the natural behaviors of their untamed counterparts. Wild dogs dig dens and chew to relieve stress. Wild felines scratch to sharpen their claws, and they often climb to scout for prey and escape predators. For both species, the search for food occupies most of their waking hours and engages multiple senses: scent, sight, and sound.

By making meals more of a challenge, owners can help their pets fulfill the urge to hunt and scavenge, says Fetko. If you have just one dog (and thus no risk of conflicts over food), give your pup a taste of the wild side by hiding treats around the house and inside toys. “Now when it comes time to eat,” Fetko says, “it’s not just a 52-second meal. It’s a longer and more enhanced experience.”

The trick works for cats, too; they’ll choose working for food over eating from a readily available source. Exercising this instinct promotes mental health, says Dr. Tony Buffington of Ohio State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine: “It stimulates the production of growth factors in the brain that sustain neural connections,” he says. “The size of the brain actually changes with environmental enrichment.”

LESSEN THE LONELINESS

Dogs can find long periods of solitude particularly difficult when they don’t have a pal to while away the hours with. “When you only have one dog, that critter looks to you for everything—not just food and medical care, but activities, play, and gen-

eral exercise,” Fetko says. If adopting a second dog isn’t feasible, a midday dog walker or doggie daycare can provide your pooch some social contact and variety when you’re away.

Longtime dog walker Ann Keating of Mount Airy, Md., has seen how her service bolsters the emotional health of latchkey pets, gives owners some peace of mind, and prevents returns to shelters, rescue groups, or breeders. “Knowing somebody else is ... caring for the animals, exercising them, and letting them out really has enabled a number of people to keep a pet they may have taken back,” she says.

If you’re on a budget, try shrinking the number of hours or days your pet is left alone with some creative scheduling, such as staggering work schedules with other household members. “Maybe you can afford doggie daycare one day a week, so now three of the seven days in the week are covered,” Dodman says. “... Maybe one of the other days he can go around for a play date with a friend. And suddenly you end up with fewer days when you have to leave your dog.”

RENEW YOUR VOWS

After consulting with Dodman, the Benards adopted a variety of solutions to improve Remy’s life, such as freezing a mixture of kibble, gravy, and canned food inside a Kong toy. Along with treat-filled toys scattered about the house, it’s their parting gift for Remy when they leave for work each day.

But in the process of trying to resolve his dog’s compulsive licking, Benard also reaffirmed his commitment to his pet. He now gets up at 5 a.m. on weekdays to give Remy a strenuous morning stroll and playtime with his rubber “Squirrel Dude” toy. And he makes time for walks and hide-and-see-

games in the evenings.

Remy now licks less and has shed some weight. And as Benard and his wife plan for the future, Remy’s needs are a major consideration; they hope to move outside their rural area to a place accessible to a doggie daycare business.

“We love our dog more than you can imagine,” Benard says. “He’s a family member.”

Pet owners and their animals can lose their deep connections when separated for too long, says Ippoliti. Stinky died a few months after his beloved enclosure was built, so to keep Jaya company when she’s away, Ippoliti hires an overnight housesitter. Jaya also has his own pillows, scratching posts, and a basket of toys.

“When I lost Stinky, it made me really appreciate that I still have Jaya,” Ippoliti says. “There is so much to the relationship, like giving to the animal and receiving love back from the animal. We miss out on this when we’re not there for them.”

▲ **WEB EXTRA:** Find tips for cat enclosures and other feline-focused home makeovers, and learn how to prevent behaviors like digging and chewing, at humanesociety.org/magazine.

