

My Pet Has Issues!
by Amy B. Wallis, Ph.D.

Dear Amy: When I'm away from the house, my dog does things like chewing on my shoes, peeing on the floor, and barking at every little noise. Is my dog mad at me?

We've all considered the possibility...is my dog doing that because he's mad at me? While it's tempting to explain their behavior in this way, there's often a simpler explanation. Certainly, emotions are at play, but it's unlikely that anger is leading to your pup's problematic behavior. Understanding what motivates our pets can help us discourage the behaviors we don't want!

In nature, there's really no function to "anger" as we know it. Your dog's primary concerns are safety versus danger, and pleasure versus discomfort. Dogs are pack animals; they need others to ensure their survival, and they depend on you keep them safe, provide nourishment, and give comfort. Naturally, you can't do all of this at the same time, so your dog is sometimes left to her own devices. During these times, she's likely to do things to protect the house, like barking at perceived "intruders", and to do things that dogs find comforting and enjoyable: chewing, exploring, and relieving herself when necessary. Unfortunately, these are exactly the behaviors we tend to attribute to the dog being "angry" at us, when, in fact, they are perfectly reasonable behaviors in the dog world.

How do we change the undesirable behaviors? Well, the easiest way is to offer an alternative. The trick here is to know your dog. If you know Fido likes to chew, remove from his reach items that you don't want him to chew, and provide safe chew toys, like Nylabones, or a Kong toy stuffed with treats. If Spot tends to eliminate in the house, take longer walks before leaving him alone so he has less need to eliminate while you're gone, and train him to spend his alone time in a crate rather than roaming freely. If Rover likes to bark, provide him an area of the house where he will have less exposure to stimuli that will provoke barking, and train him that quiet will be rewarded with a treat when you are around.

In this column, I will address these and other pet behavior issues, and offer suggestions based on research and experience for dealing with these behaviors. The first step in figuring out how to resolve your pet's issues is to understand that most of the time, there is a very simple and sensible reason our pets act as they do. As such, we can influence their actions through greater understanding.