



Separation Anxiety

Dogs with separation anxiety suffer from extreme anxiety when left alone, even when left alone for short periods of time. As a result of this anxiety, they may exhibit some unwanted behaviors that can often be disruptive or destructive. The most common of these behaviors are:

- Digging, chewing, and scratching at doors or windows in an attempt to escape
- Attempting to break out of a crate or other confinement, sometimes injuring themselves in the process
- Howling, barking, and crying
- Urination and defecation (even with housetrained dogs)

Why Do Dogs Suffer From Separation Anxiety?

We don't fully understand exactly why some dogs suffer from separation anxiety and others don't. No matter the reason, it's important to remember that the destruction and house soiling that often occur with separation anxiety are not the dog's attempt to punish or seek revenge on his owner for leaving him alone, but are actually part of a panic response.

Separation anxiety sometimes occurs when:

- A dog has never or rarely been left alone
- Following a long interval, such as a vacation, during which the owner and dog are constantly together
- After a traumatic event (from the dog's point of view), such as a period of time spent at a shelter or boarding kennel
- After a change in the family's routine or structure (a child leaving for college, a change in work schedule, a move to a new home, a new pet or person in the home, etc.)

How Do I Know If My Dog Has Separation Anxiety?

Because there are many reasons for the behaviors associated with separation anxiety, it's essential to correctly diagnose the reason for the behavior before proceeding with treatment. If most, or all, of the following statements are true about your dog, he may have separation anxiety.

- The behavior occurs exclusively or primarily when he's left alone
- The behavior *always* occurs when he's left alone, whether for a short or long period of time
- He follows you from room to room whenever you're home

- He reacts with excitement, depression, or anxiety to your preparations to leave the house
- He displays unrestrained, frantic greeting behaviors
- He does not eat when left alone

What to Do If Your Dog Has Separation Anxiety

For a minor separation anxiety problem, the following techniques may be helpful by themselves. For more severe problems, these techniques should be used along with the desensitization process described in the next section.

- Keep arrivals and departures low-key. Calmly say hi when you get home, but no sad goodbyes when you leave.
- Leave your dog with an article of clothing that smells like you, like a previously worn t-shirt.
- Give your dog something REALLY yummy to keep them occupied while you're gone. A great example is a Kong toy stuffed with kibble, peanut butter, yogurt, broth, etc., and frozen to allow the pup to lick at it for a longer period of time.
- Play the radio, TV, or other sound system at a low-medium volume.
- Use pheromone diffusers, like Adaptil, to help keep your pup feeling calm and secure.
- Try a Thundershirt or other dog anxiety vest. These tightly wrap the body to help provide a feeling of security, similar to swaddling an infant.

Desensitization Techniques - For More Severe Cases of Separation Anxiety

The primary treatment for more severe cases of separation anxiety is a systematic process of getting your dog used to being alone. You must teach your dog to remain calm during "practice" departures and short absences. We recommend the following procedure:

- Begin by engaging in your normal departure activities (getting your keys, putting on your coat), then sit back down or resume normal activities. Go to the kitchen and make dinner, sit down, and watch TV, or take them into the bathroom and take a shower. Repeat this step until your dog shows no distress in response to your activities.
- Next, engage in your normal departure activities *and* go to the door and open it, then sit back down.
- Next, step outside the door, leaving the door open, then return.
- Finally, step outside, close the door, then immediately return. Slowly get your dog accustomed to being alone with the door closed between you for several seconds.
- Proceed very gradually from step to step, repeating each step until your dog shows no signs of distress (the number of repetitions will vary depending on the severity of the problem). If at any time in this process your actions produce an anxiety response in your dog, you've proceeded too fast. Return to an earlier step in the process and

practice this step until the dog shows no distress response, then proceed to the next step.

- When your dog is tolerating your being on the other side of the door for several seconds, begin short-duration absences. This step involves giving the dog a verbal cue (for example, "I'll be back"), leaving, and then returning within a minute. Your return must be low-key: either ignore your dog or greet him quietly and calmly. If he shows no signs of distress, repeat the exercise. If he appears anxious, wait until he relaxes to repeat the exercise. Gradually increase the length of time you're gone.
- Practice as many absences as possible that last less than ten minutes. You can do many departures within one session if your dog relaxes sufficiently between departures. You should also scatter practice departures and short-duration absences throughout the day.
- Once your dog can handle short absences (30 to 90 minutes), he'll usually be able to handle longer intervals alone and you won't have to work up to all-day absences minute by minute. The hard part is at the beginning, but the job gets easier as you go along. Nevertheless, you must go slowly at first. How long it takes to condition your dog to being alone depends on the severity of his problem.

Teaching the Sit-Stay & Down-Stay

Practice sit-stay or down-stay exercises using positive reinforcement. Never punish your dog during these training sessions. Gradually increase the distance you move away from your dog. Your goal is to be able to move briefly out of your dog's sight while he remains in the "stay" position. The point is to teach him that he can remain calmly and happily in one place while you go to another. As you progress, you can do this during the course of your normal daily activities. For example, if you're watching television with your dog by your side and you get up for a snack, tell him to stay, and leave the room. When you come back, give him a treat or quietly praise him.

Interim Solutions

Because the above-described treatments can take a while, and because a dog with separation anxiety can do serious damage to himself and/or your home in the interim, some of the following suggestions may be helpful in dealing with the problems in the short term:

- Consult your veterinarian about the possibility of drug therapy. A good anti-anxiety drug should not sedate your dog, but simply reduce his anxiety while you're gone. Medication is not a cure-all and should be used in conjunction with behavior modification techniques.
- Take your dog to a reputable dog day care facility or boarding kennel.
- Leave your dog with a friend, family member, or neighbor.
- Take your dog to work with you.

What Won't Help a Separation Anxiety Problem

- Punishment is not an effective way to treat separation anxiety. In fact, if you punish your dog after you return home it may actually increase his separation anxiety.
- Getting another pet. This usually doesn't help an anxious dog as his anxiety is the result of his separation from you, his person, not merely the result of being alone. (Having another pet may help, but you should not bring home another animal just to cure your pet's separation anxiety.)
- Crating your dog. Most dogs with separation anxiety actually do better with more space and being confined exacerbates their anxiety. Dogs with severe separation anxiety may injure themselves trying to escape out of a crate.
- A dog training class. While training classes are always a good idea, they won't directly help a separation anxiety problem. Separation anxiety is not the result of disobedience or lack of training.