

Separation Anxiety

One of the most common complaints of pet parents is that their dogs are disruptive or destructive when left alone. Their dogs might urinate, defecate, bark, howl, chew, dig or try to escape. Although these problems often indicate that a dog needs to be taught polite house manners, they can also be symptoms of distress. When a dog's problems are accompanied by other distress behaviors, such as drooling and showing anxiety when his pet parents prepare to leave the house, they aren't evidence that the dog isn't house trained or doesn't know which toys are his to chew. Instead, they are indications that the dog has separation anxiety. Separation anxiety is triggered when dogs become upset because of separation from their guardians, the people they're attached to. Escape attempts by dogs with separation anxiety are often extreme and can result in self-injury and household destruction, especially around exit points like windows and doors. When treating a dog with separation anxiety, the goal is to resolve the dog's underlying anxiety by teaching him to enjoy, or at least tolerate, being left alone. This is accomplished by setting things up so that the dog experiences the situation that provokes his anxiety, namely being alone, without experiencing fear or anxiety.



Common Symptoms of Separation Anxiety

The following is a list of symptoms that may indicate separation anxiety:

- *Urinating and Defecating* - Some dogs urinate or defecate when left alone or separated from their guardians. If a dog urinates or defecates in the presence of his guardian, his house soiling probably isn't caused by separation anxiety.
- *Barking and Howling* - A dog who has separation anxiety might bark or howl when left alone or when separated from his guardian. This kind of barking or howling is persistent and doesn't seem to be triggered by anything except being left alone.
- *Chewing, Digging and Destruction* - Some dogs with separation anxiety chew on objects, door frames or window sills, dig at doors and doorways, or destroy household objects when left alone or separated from their guardians. These behaviors can result in self-injury, such as broken teeth, cut and scraped paws and damaged nails. If a dog's chewing, digging and destruction are caused by separation anxiety, they don't usually occur in his guardian's presence.
- *Escaping* - A dog with separation anxiety might try to escape from an area where he's confined when he's left alone or separated from his guardian. The dog might attempt to dig and chew through doors or windows, which could result in self-injury, such as broken teeth, cut and scraped front paws and damaged nails. If the dog's escape behavior is caused by separation anxiety, it doesn't occur when his guardian is present.
- *Pacing* - Some dogs walk or trot along a specific path in a fixed pattern when left alone or separated from their guardians. Some pacing dogs move around in circular patterns, while others walk back and forth in straight lines. If a dog's pacing behavior is caused by separation anxiety, it usually doesn't occur when his guardian is present.
- *Coprophagia* - When left alone or separated from their guardians, some dogs defecate and then consume all or some of their excrement. If a dog eats excrement because of separation anxiety, he probably doesn't perform that behavior in the presence of his guardian.

Why Do Some Dogs Develop Separation Anxiety?

There is no conclusive evidence showing exactly why dogs develop separation anxiety. However, because far more dogs who have been adopted from shelters have this behavior problem than those kept

by a single family since puppyhood, it is believed that loss of an important person or group of people in a dog's life can lead to separation anxiety. Other less dramatic changes can also trigger the disorder. The following is a list of situations that have been associated with development of separation anxiety.

- *Change of Guardian or Family* - Being abandoned, surrendered to a shelter or given to a new guardian or family can trigger the development of separation anxiety.
- *Change in Schedule* - An abrupt change in schedule in terms of when or how long a dog is left alone can trigger the development of separation anxiety. For example, if a dog's guardian works from home and spends all day with his dog but then gets a new job that requires him to leave his dog alone for six or more hours at a time, the dog might develop separation anxiety because of that change.
- *Change in Residence* - Moving to a new residence can trigger the development of separation anxiety.
- *Change in Household Membership* - The sudden absence of a resident family member, either due to death or moving away, can trigger the development of separation anxiety.

Medical Problems to Rule Out First

- *Incontinence Caused by Medical Problems* - Some dogs' house soiling is caused by incontinence, a medical condition in which a dog "leaks" or voids his bladder. Dogs with incontinence problems often seem unaware that they've soiled. Sometimes they void urine while asleep. A number of medical issues—including a urinary tract infection, a weak sphincter caused by old age, hormone-related problems after spay surgery, bladder stones, diabetes, kidney disease, Cushing's disease, neurological problems and abnormalities of the genitalia—can cause urinary incontinence in dogs. Before attempting behavior modification for separation anxiety, please see your dog's veterinarian to rule out medical issues.
- *Medications* - There are a number of medications that can cause frequent urination and house soiling. If your dog takes any medications, please contact his veterinarian to find out whether or not they might contribute to his house-soiling problems.

Other Behavior Problems to Rule Out

Sometimes it's difficult to determine whether a dog has separation anxiety or not. Some common behavior problems can cause similar symptoms. Before concluding that your dog has separation anxiety, it's important to rule out the following behavior problems:

- *Juvenile Destruction* - Many young dogs engage in destructive chewing or digging while their guardians are home as well as when they're away.
- *Boredom* - Dogs need mental stimulation, and some dogs can be disruptive when left alone because they're bored and looking for something to do. These dogs usually don't appear anxious. Learn to find fun, effective ways to combat boredom and spice up your dog's life.
- *Excessive Barking or Howling* - Some dogs bark or howl in response to various triggers in their environments, like unfamiliar sights and sounds. They usually vocalize when their guardians are home as well as when they're away.

What to Do If Your Dog Has Separation Anxiety

- *Treatment for Mild Separation Anxiety* - If your dog has a *mild* case of separation anxiety, counter-conditioning might reduce or resolve the problem. Counter-conditioning is a treatment process that changes an animal's fearful, anxious or aggressive reaction to a pleasant, relaxed one instead. It's done by associating the sight or presence of a feared or disliked person, animal, place, object or situation with something really good, something the dog loves. Over time, the dog learns that whatever he fears actually predicts good things for him. For dogs with separation anxiety, counter-conditioning focuses on developing an association between being alone and good things, like delicious food. To develop this kind of association, every time you leave the house, you can offer your dog a puzzle toy stuffed with food that will take him at least 20 to 30 minutes

to finish. Be sure to remove the toy as soon as you return home so that your dog only has access to them and the high-value foods inside when he's by himself.

- *Treatment for Moderate to Severe Separation Anxiety* - Moderate or severe cases of separation anxiety require a more complex desensitization and counter-conditioning program. In these cases, it's crucial to gradually accustom a dog to being alone by starting with many short separations that *do not* produce anxiety and then gradually increasing the duration of the separations over many weeks of daily sessions.

Desensitization

The following steps briefly describe a desensitization and counter-conditioning program. Please keep in mind that this is a short, general explanation. Desensitization and counter-conditioning are complex and can be tricky to carry out. Fear must be avoided or the procedure will backfire and the dog will get more frightened. Because treatment must progress and change according to the pet's reactions, and because these reactions can be difficult to read and interpret, desensitization and counter-conditioning require the guidance of a trained and experienced professional.

Step One: Pre-departure Cues

As mentioned above, some dogs begin to feel anxious while their guardians get ready to leave. For example, a dog might start to pace, pant and whine when he notices his guardian applying makeup, putting on shoes and a coat, and then picking up a bag or car keys. (If your dog doesn't show signs of anxiety when you're preparing to leave him alone, you can just skip to step two below.) Guardians of dogs who become upset during pre-departure rituals are unable to leave—even for just few seconds—without triggering their dogs' extreme anxiety. Your dog may see telltale cues that you're leaving (like your putting on your coat or picking up your keys) and get so anxious about being left alone that he can't control himself and forgets that you'll come back.

One treatment approach to this “pre-departure anxiety” is to teach your dog that when you pick up your keys or put on your coat, it doesn't always mean that you're leaving. You can do this by exposing your dog to these cues in various orders several times a day—without leaving. For example, put on your boots and coat, and then just watch TV instead of leaving. Or pick up your keys, and then sit down at the kitchen table for awhile.

This will reduce your dog's anxiety because these cues won't always lead to your departure, and so your dog won't get so anxious when he sees them. Please be aware, though, that your dog has many years of learning the significance of your departure cues, so in order to learn that the cues no longer predict your long absences, your dog must experience the fake cues many, many times a day for many weeks. After your dog doesn't become anxious when he sees you getting ready to leave, you can move on to the next step below.

Step Two: Graduated Departures/Absences

If your dog is less anxious before you leave, you can probably skip the pre-departure treatment above and start with *very short* departures. The main rule is to plan your absences to be shorter than the time it takes for your dog to become upset. To get started, train your dog to perform out-of-sight stays by an inside door in the home, such as the bathroom. You can teach your dog to sit or down and stay while you go to the other side of the bathroom door. You can teach your dog to sit or down and stay while you go to the other side of the bathroom door. You can also contact a Certified Professional Dog Trainer for assistance. Gradually increase the length of time you wait on the other side of the door, out of your dog's sight. You can also work on getting your dog used to pre-departure cues as you practice the stay. For ex-

ample, ask your dog to stay. Then put on your coat, pick up your purse and go into the bathroom while your dog continues to stay.

- Progress to doing out-of-sight stay exercises at a bedroom door, and then later at an exit door. If you always leave through the front door, do the exercises at the back door first. By the time you start working with your dog at exit doors, he shouldn't behave anxiously because he has a history of playing the "stay game."
- At this point, you can start to incorporate very short absences into your training. Start with absences that last only one to two seconds, and then slowly increase the time you're out of your dog's sight. When you've trained up to separations of five to ten seconds long, build in counter-conditioning by giving your dog a stuffed food toy just before you step out the door. The food-stuffed toy also works as a safety cue that tells the dog that this is a "safe" separation.
- During your sessions, be sure to wait a few minutes between absences. After each short separation, it's important to make sure that your dog is completely relaxed before you leave again. If you leave again right away, while your dog is still excited about your return from the previous separation, he'll already feel aroused when he experiences the next absence. This arousal might make him less able to tolerate the next separation, which could make the problem worse rather than better.
- Remember to behave in a very calm and quiet manner when going out and coming in. This will lower the contrast between times when you're there and times when you're gone.
- You must judge when your dog is able to tolerate an increase in the length of separation. Each dog reacts differently, so there are no standard timelines. Deciding when to increase the time that your dog is alone can be very difficult, and many pet parents make errors. They want treatment to progress quickly, so they expose their dogs to durations that are too long, which provokes anxiety and worsens the problem. To prevent this kind of mistake, watch for signs of stress in your dog. These signs might include dilated pupils, panting, yawning, salivating, trembling, pacing and exuberant greeting. If you detect stress, you should back up and shorten the length of your departures to a point where your dog can relax again. Then start again at that level and progress more slowly.
- You will need to spend a significant amount of time building up to 40-minute absences because most of your dog's anxious responses will occur within the first 40 minutes that he's alone. This means that over weeks of conditioning, you'll increase the duration of your departures by only a few seconds each session, or every couple of sessions, depending on your dog's tolerance at each level. Once your dog can tolerate 40 minutes of separation from you, you can increase absences by larger chunks of time (5-minute increments at first, then later 15-minute increments). Once your dog can be alone for 90 minutes without getting upset or anxious, he can probably handle four to eight hours. (Just to be safe, try leaving him alone for four hours at first, and then work up to eight full hours over a few days.)
- This treatment process can be accomplished within a few weeks if you can conduct several daily sessions on the weekends and twice-daily sessions during the work week, usually before leaving for work and in the evenings.

A Necessary Component of Separation Anxiety Treatment

During desensitization to any type of fear, it is essential to ensure that your dog *never* experiences the full-blown version of whatever provokes his anxiety or fear. He must experience only a low-intensity version that doesn't frighten him. Otherwise, he won't learn to feel calm and comfortable in situations that upset him. This means that during treatment for separation anxiety, your dog *cannot be left alone* except during your desensitization sessions. Fortunately there are plenty of alternative arrangements:

- If possible, take your dog to work with you.

- Arrange for a family member, friend or dog sitter to come to your home and stay with your dog when you're not there. (Most dogs suffering from separation anxiety are fine as long as someone is with them. That someone doesn't necessarily need to be you.)
- Take your dog to a sitter's house or to a doggy daycare.
- Many dogs suffering from separation anxiety are okay when left in a car. You can try leaving your dog in a car—but only if the weather is moderate. Be warned: dogs can suffer from heatstroke and die if left in cars in warm weather (70 degrees Fahrenheit and up)—even for just a few minutes. DO NOT leave your dog in a car unless you're sure that the interior of your car won't heat up.

To Crate or Not to Crate?

Crate training can be helpful for some dogs if they learn that the crate is their safe place to go when left alone. However, for other dogs, the crate can cause added stress and anxiety. In order to determine whether or not you should try using a crate, monitor your dog's behavior during crate training and when he's left in the crate while you're home. If he shows signs of distress (heavy panting, excessive salivation, frantic escape attempts, persistent howling or barking), crate confinement isn't the best option for him. Instead of using a crate, you can try confining your dog to one room behind a baby gate.



Provide Plenty of “Jobs” for your dog to do. Providing lots of physical and mental stimulation is a vital part of treating many behavior problems, especially those involving anxiety. Exercising your dog's mind and body can greatly enrich his life, decrease stress and provide appropriate outlets for normal dog behaviors. Additionally, a physically and mentally tired dog doesn't have much excess energy to expend when he's left alone. To keep your dog busy and happy, try the following suggestions:

- Give your dog at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity (for example, running and swimming) every day. Try to exercise your dog right before you have to leave him by himself. This might help him relax and rest while you're gone.
- Play fun, interactive games with your dog, such as fetch and tug-of-war.
- Take your dog on daily walks and outings. Take different routes and visit new places as often as possible so that he can experience novel smells and sights.
- If your dog likes other dogs, let him play off-leash with his canine buddies.
- Frequently provide food puzzle toys, like the KONG, the Buster Cube, the Tricky Treat Ball™ and the Tug-a-Jug™. You can feed your dog his meals in these toys or stuff them with a little peanut butter, cheese or yogurt. Also give your dog a variety of attractive edible and inedible chew things.
- Puzzle toys and chew items encourage chewing and licking, which have been shown to have a calming effect on dogs. Be sure to provide them whenever you leave your dog alone. Make your dog “hunt” his meals by hiding small piles of his kibble around your house or yard when you leave. Most dogs love this game!
- Enroll in a reward-based training class to increase your dog's mental activity and enhance the bond between you and your dog. Contact a Certified Professional Dog Trainer for group or private classes that can give you and your dog lots of great skills to learn and games to play together. After you and your dog have learned a few new skills, you can mentally tire your dog out by practicing them right before you leave your dog home alone.

Medications Might Help

Always consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist before giving your dog any type of medication for a behavior problem. The use of medications can be very helpful, especially for severe

cases of separation anxiety. Some dogs are so distraught by any separation from their pet parents that treatment can't be implemented without the help of medication. Anti-anxiety medication can help a dog tolerate some level of isolation without experiencing anxiety. It can also make treatment progress more quickly. On rare occasions, a dog with mild separation anxiety might benefit from drug therapy alone, without accompanying behavior modification. The dog becomes accustomed to being left alone with the help of the drug and retains this new conditioning after he's gradually weaned off the medication. However, most dogs need a combination of medication and behavior modification.

If you'd like to explore this option, speak with your veterinarian, a veterinary behaviorist or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist who can work closely with your vet.

What NOT to Do

Please do not scold or punish your dog. *Anxious behaviors are not the result of disobedience or spite. They are distress responses!* Your dog displays anxious behaviors when left alone because he's upset and trying to cope with a great deal of stress. If you punish him, he may become *even more* upset and the problem could get much worse.

Article used with permission from Nevada Humane Society