

Separation Anxiety

When a dog has separation anxiety, he becomes visibly anxious when his owner is either preparing to leave the home, or when the owner actually departs. Dogs with separation anxiety may bark or howl incessantly, pant or salivate excessively, urinate or defecate on the floor or on furniture, destroy household items (furniture, molding), or if crated escape from the crate, sometimes resulting in self-injury.

Why some dogs develop separation anxiety and others do not is not completely known. Situations increasing the likelihood that a dog develops separation anxiety may include:

- adoption from an animal shelter (due to experiencing the loss of a guardian or guardians, or feelings of abandonment)
- moving to a new residence
- a change in daily routine (from the owner working from home all day to now working outside of the home)
- the loss of a family member (due to divorce, death, etc.)

To resolve your dog's separation anxiety, it will be necessary to teach your dog to enjoy, or at least tolerate, being left home alone.

Recommendations

Mild separation anxiety. If your dog doesn't become overly anxious while you're preparing to leave, appears sad upon you leaving yet can cope with your absence his separation anxiety is probably mild. Just as you exit your home, leave him with a stuffed Kong® toy or other long-lasting chew, long enough to last 20-30 minutes. Upon your arrival back home, remove the Kong® toy or chew, even if it isn't eaten. This will help him associate your departure with those special treats so that he learns to eat the treat while you're gone. In other words, good things happen when you leave!

Moderate to severe separation anxiety. If your dog becomes anxious while you're getting ready to leave, his separation anxiety is more severe. A good starting point is to make your departure cues unreliable so that your dog doesn't know if you're leaving or staying. If the cues no longer signal your departure, his anxiety will not escalate.

- Two to three times daily, pick up your keys, purse, attaché, etc., and then sit down on the couch and watch TV. Put your shoes and coat on, and then sweep the floor. Engage in any departure behavior typical of your routine, yet do not really leave or simply walk towards the door, and then turn around and come back inside. Repeat this exercise for as long as it takes for your dog's anxiety to diminish.

Teach your dog to perform "out-of-sight" stays.

- Ask your dog to stay in position, perhaps seated or lying down, on one side of a door in your home while you position yourself on the other side of the door (such as the bathroom or closet, backdoor and front door). Reward your dog with a special treat as soon as you return to him, before he breaks his stay. Over the course of several weeks, gradually increase the length of time you remain on the other side of the door. Perform the pre-departure cues during this exercise too. The door you typically exit to leave the house should be the last door used in this exercise.

Gradually increase the length of time of your absences.

1. Begin with very short absences (1-2 seconds), and then over the course of several weeks increase your absence duration to 40 minutes. Offer your dog a stuffed Kong® or long lasting chew bone. If your dog doesn't eat the chew bone or food stuffed in the Kong®, take it away. Remember we want your dog to associate these special treats with your departure. Repeat the exercise. Each time you begin a new session your dog must be in a relaxed state. Signs of stress include: panting, salivating, dilated pupils, yawning, overly excited greeting. If your dog isn't relaxed, wait until he is and then repeat the exercise again. Spread the exercise out randomly throughout the day.
2. When building up to 40 minutes, vary the length of time you're absent so that there is no apparent pattern. For example, on the first day start at 25 seconds and then proceed as follows: 25 s, 30 s, 40 s, 20 s, 35 s, 45 s, 50 s, 35 s, etc. The next day start at 40 s, 55 s, 50 s, 35 s, 65 s, 75 s, 60 s, 80 s, 40 s, 90 s, 70 s, 100 s. When you're up to 5 minutes, vary the times by 30 s increments such as 5½ min, 6 min, 4½ min, 7 min, 6½ min, etc. When you reach 30 minutes, really mix it up: 25 min, 15 min, 30 min, 40 min, 10 min, 50 min, 20 min, 25 min, 5 min, 75 min. At this point if you're able to leave your dog for 90 minutes, and he isn't displaying any signs of stress, then you can probably leave him for 4 to 8 hours, a typically work day (adult dogs only – very young puppies should never be left alone for 8 hours). Never increase the amount of time your dog is left alone unless he appeared relaxed in the previous session. Once you're able to leave your dog alone for extended periods of time, be sure to exercise your dog adequately prior to your departure.

Drug Therapy

Some dogs' separation anxiety is so severe that they cannot be left alone for even one second, making treatment sessions impossible to commence. In these cases, speak to your veterinarian about medication to help alleviate enough anxiety to begin treatment sessions.

Helpful Tips

Dogs with severe separation anxiety should never be left alone anytime during their treatment period because just one anxiety-producing experience will cause setbacks in the treatment. Alternatives to leaving your dog home alone include:

- taking your dog to doggy daycare (if your dog is dog friendly)
- arranging for a dog sitter (whether it be at your home or the home of the dog sitter)
- taking your dog to work with you
- crate training your dog (**NOTE:** some dogs become more stressed when crated and injure themselves trying to break out of the crate). If you see any signs of stress – excessive salivation, panicked attempts to escape, heavy panting) then **do not** crate your dog.

The treatment for separation anxiety can be a time-consuming process. If you do not have the time, or if your dog's separation anxiety is severe, consider contacting a professional such as a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB), a board certified veterinary behaviorist (DACVB), or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) for help.

Lastly never scold your dog for being anxious. Remember that your dog is responding to what he perceives as a very stressful situation. Yelling at him will only serve to increase his anxiety.

Barbara Pezzanite, Ph.D., CPDT-KA
Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist