



Managing and Treating Separation Anxiety

Does my dog have separation anxiety?

Often, when a dog howls, chews, digs, urinates or defecates in the home when he is left alone, it's simply because he needs to be taught polite house manners. Many newly adopted dogs need to be house trained or taught which toys are appropriate for chewing. However with some dogs these behaviors can be symptoms of distress. When these behaviors are accompanied by other signs such as drooling, pacing or appearing anxious, the dog may have separation anxiety.

Symptoms of Separation Anxiety

Barking or Howling

Many dogs will bark in response to a stimulus outside their home when left alone, but a dog with separation anxiety may bark excessively or incessantly with no apparent trigger. Dogs that bark because of separation anxiety will not vocalize inappropriately while their owners are present.

Chewing and Being Destructive

Dogs with separation anxiety may chew on household items or furniture. They may chew or dig on window sills, flooring/carpet, or door frames in an attempt to escape. These behaviors usually won't occur in the owner's presence.

If a dog is chewing or digging inappropriately while not also appearing anxious, he may just be bored. Dogs need mental stimulation, and some dogs can be destructive when left alone with nothing to do.

Urinating/Defecating

Otherwise housebroken dogs may soil the home when left alone.

However, a dog that occasionally has an accident in the house when left alone simply may not be completely house trained. His house training may have been inconsistent, or may have involved punishment that made him afraid to eliminate while his owner is nearby.

Pacing

Some anxious dogs may pace a specific path through the house when left alone, and won't show this behavior in the owner's presence.

Treating Mild Separation Anxiety

The goal of working with a dog that is anxious when separated from its owners is to resolve the dog's underlying anxiety by teaching him to tolerate being left alone. This can be accomplished by gradually exposing him to the frightening situation – being left alone – in increments, without him experiencing fear or anxiety.

Provide Daily Stimulation and Exercise

A mentally and physically tired dog doesn't have as much energy to spend on being anxious while left alone! Many behavior problems that are rooted in anxiety are best treated by incorporating lots of exercise and intellectual enrichment into your dog's daily routine.

- Provide at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity each day – preferably before you leave him alone, so he's worn out! Jogging, fetching, swimming, or spending some time socializing in the dog park are just a few ideas.
- Take your dog on daily walks and outings so he can experience new sights and smells to provide the environmental enrichment he craves.
- Enroll in a reward-based training class to increase your dog's mental activity. Not only does this help wear out your dog with mental stimulation, but it teaches positive behaviors and strengthens the bond between you and your dog. Once you've both learned some new skills, you can practice at home and mentally tire out your dog before leaving him home alone.

Counterconditioning

If your dog has a mild case of separation anxiety, counterconditioning might reduce or completely resolve the problem behaviors. Counterconditioning is a treatment method that teaches an animal to associate a situation (such as being left alone) with pleasant things rather than being afraid, and over time that association becomes engrained and natural.

To develop a positive association with being left alone, every time you leave the house, try offering your dog a special toy or treat that will keep him occupied for a while. When you return home, remove these treats so he knows that he only gets them when he's left alone.

Crate Training

Crate training can be helpful for some dogs with mild separation anxiety. Not only does the confinement of the crate help prevent some destructive behaviors during the training process, but the dog can learn that their crate is their safe place to go when they are left alone.

However, crate training isn't for everyone; for some dogs, the crate can cause added stress. If your dog shows signs of heavy distress during crate training (such as heavy panting, excessive salivation, frantic behavior, or chewing excessively on the crate in an attempt to escape), crate confinement may not be the best option for your dog. If confinement is still necessary, consider keeping them in a closed-off room or using a baby gate to keep them in a safe area.

Natural Treatment Aids

There are a wide variety of products on the market to help with alleviating anxiety in dogs. Not all options work for all dogs, and many are best used in conjunction with counterconditioning training and positive reinforcement.

Anxiety Wraps

Anxiety wraps (such as ThunderShirts) work by applying calming pressure to help alleviate anxiety, and can be used safely without supervision.

DAP (Dog Appeasing Pheromone)

DAP products come in many forms, such as sprays, collars, and diffusers. The scent mimics a dog's natural calming pheromones, and is clinically proven to help reduce stress in many dogs.

Music Therapy

There is specialized psychoacoustic music designed specifically to help calm anxious dogs (Through a Dog's Ear, Relax My Dog, Canine Lullabies, etc), which is arranged and recorded to provide useful auditory stimulation. This soothing music can be played during crate training or while your dog is left home alone.

Essential Oils

Essential oils not only smell good, but some owners and trainers are also using specially formulated blends to help with dog anxiety issues, as well. Oils generally can be sprayed directly on the pet, onto an anxiety wrap, a bandana, or blanket. Essential oils work as a training aid, and usually work best after using it first while the dog is calm and relaxed so he learns to associate the scent with calm behavior.

Treat Ideas

- KONG toys stuffed with something tasty like canned food, cream cheese, low-fat yogurt, or peanut butter is a great snack to keep a dog busy. Freeze it to make it last even longer!

- Puzzle toys like KONG Wobbler, Busy Buddy Kibble Nibble, or OmegaPaw Tricky Treat Ball are great for stuffing with kibble and tiny, tasty treats.

- Try feeding your dog all of his daily meals in a puzzle toy or slow feeder; it's mentally stimulating, will keep him occupied and out of trouble, and he might even learn to like being left alone!

Calming Supplements

- There are a wide variety of "calming" supplement blends that can be purchased at most pet stores in pill or chewable form. Common ingredients include chamomile, ginger, taurine, hops, thiamine, and valerian.
- Tryptophan can be included in a supplement blend or used alone. Tryptophan acts as a precursor to serotonin and melatonin in the brain to support restful sleep and relaxation.
- Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone in mammals that is involved in circadian rhythms, and is marketed for people as a natural "sleep aid" which can also help reduce anxiety. Melatonin can be purchased in most drug stores over the counter in various forms. It's generally recommended that dogs under 35 pounds be given around 1.5 mg and larger dogs up to 6 mg, which can be repeated up to 3 times daily.
- Rescue Remedy is a popular calming supplement containing impatiens, star of Bethlehem, cherry plum, rock rose and clematis. It comes in dropper form, which can be added to your dog's drinking water.

Treating Moderate to Severe Separation Anxiety

While most dogs with separation anxiety can be managed with just a little training and management, some have more severe symptoms and may suffer from other anxiety disorders. This heightened anxiety may be emphasized during stressful events in the dog's life, such as moving to a new home or being adopted into a new family, and need extra care while they adjust to their new lifestyle. However, there are also dogs that suffer from some degree of anxiety their whole lives and need continued management and support.

To treat a dog with more severe separation anxiety, it's important to gradually accustom him to being alone with short separations that do not produce anxiety. Employing a program to desensitize and countercondition your dog can be tricky to carry out. Fear must be avoided, or the training program will backfire and he will only become more anxious when he experiences separation later. Some tips for forming a training program are below, but you may consider consulting with a qualified professional behaviorist to provide guidance.

What NOT To Do

Although it can be frustrating when your dog "misbehaves" when he is left alone, **do not punish or scold your dog.**

The anxious or destructive behaviors of a dog with moderate to severe separation anxiety are not the result of disobedience, boredom or a lack of manners; they are signs of fear and distress.

Adding punishment only increases anxiety and fearfulness, confuses your dog, and will make the problem far more difficult to resolve. Using punishment during a training program, particularly with anxious dogs, can also damage the relationship between you and your dog.

Desensitization: Pre-departure Cues

Some dogs begin to feel anxious when they know that their owners are getting ready to leave. If your dog begins to whine, pace, pant or show other signs of anxiety when you start packing, picking up your keys, putting on shoes, or doing other pre-departure rituals, you may need to work on desensitizing your dog to these cues.

The easiest way to approach pre-departure anxiety is to teach your dog that these behaviors don't always mean that you're about to leave. Expose him to these cues in various orders several times a day...without leaving, of course! Pick your keys up, then sit down and watch some TV; put on your shoes and grab your purse, then go to the kitchen and make supper—examine what regular rituals you go through before you leave home, and repeat them randomly throughout the day.

Graduated Absences

When you begin acclimating your dog to being left alone, it's careful to plan your absences to be shorter than the time it takes for your dog to become upset. An easy way to begin is by putting your dog in a "sit" or a "down" at a doorway inside the home, such as near the door to a bathroom or bedroom, and then enter the room and close the door behind you. After a brief period, come back out and resume normal behavior. Gradually increase the length of time you stay in the other room, and switch the rooms that you stay in. If your dog has pre-departure anxiety, you can also use your departure rituals before leaving the room.

Once your dog is acclimated to this routine, you can start leaving the house for brief periods of time. Use special treats like stuffed KONG toys (see above for some suggestions) to help keep him occupied and assist in counterconditioning for the longer periods of separation as you build up the length of your absences.

Usually the "sweet spot" for length of separation is 60-90 minutes; once they can be alone for this long, a full work day may be feasible (but it's safest to try for a shorter period, such as four hours, first). To reach this goal, expect to spend many shorter sessions over the course of up to a few weeks to condition your dog to the routine before attempting a long separation.

Don't Rush It!

One easy mistake during this process is to increase the lengths of separation too quickly. Each dog will react differently, so it's up to you to be sensitive to your dog's behavior and stress levels and make sure you aren't moving too fast.

By exposing your dog to periods of separation that are too long, you may increase their anxiety and take you a few steps back instead of quickening your progress!

Considerations during the Training Process

As emphasized, it's important not to leave your dog alone for a long period of time until they are ready. But most owners have to work or go to class or have other obligations during the day, of course! It's important to look into alternative arrangements during the treatment process so that your dog isn't left alone while he is being conditioned to accept your absence.

If possible, take your dog to work with you. You can also arrange for a family member, friend or pet sitter to come to your home and stay with your dog—or take him to their house—while you aren't there so that he isn't alone. Another good idea is to take him to a doggy daycare which provides enrichment, socialization and exercise, as well.

Medication

While it is generally recommended to first try training, behavior modification exercises, and natural methods of treatment for dogs with anxiety disorders, it is important to also know that there are medications that may be able to offer your dog the quality of life that may not be possible any other way. Like most methods of treating anxiety, not all medications work for all dogs, and most work best when used alongside a behavior modification program. Anti-anxiety and anti-depressant prescription medications can help a dog tolerate some level of isolation without experiencing panic, and may help accelerate the conditioning process by allowing you to increase lengths of separation more quickly.

Always consult with an experienced veterinarian that is familiar with prescribing medications for behavior problems, most preferably a veterinary behaviorist, before implementing a medication plan. If your veterinarian is unfamiliar with behavior disorders, consult with a qualified animal behaviorist that can work closely with your vet. There are a wide variety of medications for addressing anxiety in dogs, and it's important to find one that will work for your pet. It's possible that the wrong medication may be counterproductive rather than helpful.