

Treating Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Now that many of us are sheltering in place or working from home, our dogs are at risk for developing separation anxiety when our schedules return to normal. Dogs are highly social creatures and after enjoying having the family around all the time, some are going to have a hard time adjusting to being alone when schools and businesses reopen. Dogs suffering from separation anxiety might urinate, defecate, bark, howl, chew, dig or try to escape when left alone. 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.

Some dogs suffering from separation anxiety become agitated when their guardians prepare to leave. Others seem anxious or depressed prior to their guardians' departure or when their guardians aren't present. Some try to prevent their guardians from leaving. Usually, right after a guardian leaves a dog with separation anxiety, the dog will begin barking and displaying other distress behaviors within a short time after being left alone—often within minutes. When the guardian returns home, the dog acts as though it's been years since he's seen his mom or dad!

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.

What to Do If Your Dog Has Separation Anxiety

Treatment for Mild Separation Anxiety

If your dog has a mild case of separation anxiety, counterconditioning might reduce or resolve the problem. Counterconditioning 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, counterconditioning 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. For example, try giving your dog a KONG[®] stuffed with something really tasty, like low-fat cream cheese, Cheez Whiz[®] or low-fat peanut butter, frozen banana and cottage cheese, or canned dog food and kibble. A KONG can even be frozen so that getting all the food out takes even more of your dog's time. Your dog might also love a Buster[®] Cube, a Kibble Nibble[™] or a TreatStik[®] filled with kibble. Be sure to remove these special toys 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. You can feed your dog all of his daily meals in special toys. For example, you can give your dog a KONG or two stuffed with his breakfast and some tasty treats every morning before going to work. Keep in mind, though, that this approach will only work for mild cases of separation anxiety because highly anxious dogs usually won't eat when their guardians aren't home.

Treatment for Moderate to Severe Separation Anxiety

Moderate or severe cases of separation anxiety require a more complex desensitization and counterconditioning 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.

The following steps briefly describe a desensitization and counterconditioning program. Desensitization and counterconditioning 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 counterconditioning require the guidance of a trained and experienced professional. For help designing and carrying out a desensitization and counterconditioning plan, consult a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB) or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB). If you can't find a behaviorist, you can seek help from a Certified Pet Dog Trainer (CPDT), but be sure that the trainer is qualified to help you. Determine whether she or he has education and experience in treating fear with desensitization and counterconditioning, since this kind of expertise isn't required for CPDT certification.

Step One: Predeparture 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 predeparture 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 "predeparture 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 a while. 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 predeparture 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. 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 predeparture cues as you practice the stay. For example, 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

counterconditioning 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.

In addition to your graduated absences exercises, all greetings (hellos and goodbyes) should be conducted in a very calm manner. When saying goodbye, just give your dog a pat on the head, say

goodbye and leave. Similarly, when arriving home, say hello to your dog and then don't pay any more attention to him until he's calm and relaxed. The amount of time it takes for your dog to relax once you've returned home will depend on his level of anxiety and individual temperament. To decrease your dog's excitement level when you come home, it might help to distract him by asking him to perform some simple behaviors that he's already learned, such as sit, down or shake.

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 Pet 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.
- Get involved in dog sports, such as agility, freestyle (dancing with your dog) or flyball.

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

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.