

Separation Anxiety

Dogs with separation anxiety exhibit behavior problems when they're left alone. Typically, they'll have a dramatic anxiety response within a short time (20–45 minutes) after their owners leave them. The most common of these behaviors are:

- Digging, chewing, and scratching at doors or windows in an attempt to escape and reunite with their owners.
- Howling, barking, and crying in an attempt to get their owner to return.
- Urination and defecation (even with housetrained dogs) as a result of distress.

Why Do Dogs Suffer from Separation Anxiety?

We don't fully understand why some dogs suffer from separation anxiety and, under similar circumstances, others don't. It's important to realize, however, 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. In reality, they are actually part of a panic response.

Separation anxiety sometimes occurs:

- When a dog accustomed to constant human companionship is left alone for the first time.
- 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 (such as a child leaving for college, a change in work schedule, a move to a new home, or a new pet or person in the home).

How Do I Know If My Dog Has Separation Anxiety?

If most, or all, of the following statements are true about your dog, he may have a separation anxiety problem:

- The behavior occurs exclusively or primarily when he's left alone.
- He follows you from room to room whenever you're home.
- He displays effusive, frantic greeting behaviors.
- The behavior *always* occurs when he's left alone, whether for a short or long period of time.
- He reacts with excitement, depression, or anxiety to your preparations to leave the house.
- He dislikes spending time outdoors by himself.

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. For example, when you arrive home, ignore your dog for the first few minutes, and then calmly pet him. This may be hard for you to do, but it's important!
- Leave your dog with an article of clothing that smells like you—such as an old t-shirt that you've slept in recently.
- Establish a "safety cue"—a word or action that you use every time you leave that tells your dog you'll be back. Dogs usually learn to associate certain cues with short absences by their owners. For example, when you take out the garbage, your dog knows you come right back and doesn't become anxious. Therefore, it's helpful to associate a safety cue with your short-duration absences. Some examples of safety cues are a playing radio, a playing television, or a toy (one that doesn't have dangerous fillings and can't be torn into pieces). Use your safety cue during practice sessions with your dog. Be sure to avoid presenting your dog with the safety cue when you leave for a period of time longer than he can tolerate; if you do, the value of the safety cue will be lost. Very hard rubber toys that can be stuffed with treats and Nylabone®-like products are good choices.

Teaching the Sit-Stay and Down-Stay

Another technique for reducing separation anxiety in your dog is practicing the common "sit-stay" or "down-stay" training exercises using positive reinforcement. Your goal is to be able to move briefly out of your dog's sight while he remains in the "stay" position, and thereby teach your dog that he can remain calmly and happily in one place while you go to another. To do this, you gradually increase the distance you move away from your dog. 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 praise him quietly. Never punish your dog during these training sessions.

Interim Solutions

Because the treatments described above can take a while, and because a dog with separation anxiety can do serious damage to himself and/or your home in the interim, consider these suggestions to help you and your dog cope 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. Such medication is a temporary measure and should be used in conjunction with behavior modification techniques.
- Take your dog to a dog day care facility or boarding kennel.
- Leave your dog with a friend, family member, or neighbor.
- Take your dog to work with you, even for half a day, if possible.