



Separation Anxiety

Courtesy of the ASPCA

One of the most common complaints by 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 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.

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.

Common Symptoms of Separation Anxiety

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

- Urinating and Defecating
- Barking and Howling
- Chewing, Digging and Destruction
- Escaping
- Pacing

Medical Problems to Rule Out First

- Incontinence Caused by Medical Problems
- Medications

Other Behavior Problems to Rule Out

- Submissive or Excitement Urination
- Incomplete House Training
- Urine Marking
- Juvenile Destruction
- Boredom
- Excessive Barking or Howling

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. We recommend seeking professional consultation for more severe forms of separation anxiety.

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, You can feed your dog his meals in these toys or stuff them with a little peanut butter, cheese or yogurt. Puzzle toys and chew items encourage chewing and licking, which have been shown to have a calming effect on dogs.
- 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. Get involved in dog sports, such as agility, freestyle (dancing with your dog) or flyball.

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.