

Dealing with Separation Anxiety

The scenario is all too familiar: you meet the dog of your dreams – affectionate, playful, heart-breakingly cute – and take him home. You’re thrilled when he hops up into bed with you for the night, and cheerfully bid him farewell in the morning as you’re leaving for work. But when you return in the evening, you find a disaster: furniture and belongings chewed to bits, carpets and doors scratched or destroyed, and the evidence of several “accidents” in different locations. You’re upset: they told you this dog was housetrained! They told you he was a good boy! Well, he is. His behavior when you walk out the door has nothing to do with training, and everything to do with a psychological condition called “separation anxiety.” It may feel insurmountable at first, but don’t despair: armed with a little knowledge and a lot of patience, you can help your new pet be the wonderful, happy pooch you fell in love with 24 hours a day, whether you’re home or not.

Is It Separation Anxiety?

There are a few important things to look for to determine whether your dog is suffering from separation anxiety, or just needs to learn a few manners.

- What does he do when you’re gone? A dog with separation anxiety acts out in an attempt to either get as close as possible to things that smell like you, or to escape: look for extensive destructive chewing, scratching, and digging of discarded clothes or shoes, favorite furniture, and doors and windows. Incessant barking, howling, or whining are also signs of separation anxiety, as is inappropriate urination and defecation in several areas, despite otherwise perfect housetraining.
- When does the destructive behavior occur? A dog with separation anxiety will *only* act out when left alone; and, additionally, he will *always* act out when left alone. What he is experiencing is a panic response at the idea of abandonment: there are no “good days” and “bad days” for a dog with separation anxiety; any period of isolation is cause for panic.
- Where is he when you’re home? A dog with separation anxiety will follow you from room to room and seem almost frantic to remain at your side.
- How does he react when you arrive at home or prepare to leave? A dog with separation anxiety will greet you with overwhelming excitement every time you return home, and will display open distress, depression, or anxiety as you prepare to leave.
- How does he act outdoors? A dog with separation anxiety will be just as uncomfortable being alone outdoors as he is being alone indoors.

What Causes Separation Anxiety?

To really understand how to correct your dog’s anxiety, you have to understand what it brought on his distress. There are a few main causes of separation anxiety. If he’s a puppy, he may just be accustomed to constant

companionship; the first time he’s left alone, he will be confused and afraid. Fortunately, very young puppies adjust quickly.

If he is a young adult or adult, his anxiety is most likely caused by either a stressful change in routine or structure, or a traumatic event. Have you moved? Introduced a new family member to your household, or had one of his favorite family members depart? Have you just spent an extended period of time constantly by his side, on a vacation for example, and then gone back to your daily work routine? Any of these disruptions in the daily life he’s accustomed to can trigger separation anxiety.

Unfortunately, the most common cause in dogs adopted from humane societies and shelters is the trauma of being abandoned by a previous owner. Try to see things from the dog’s perspective: he has been with the same family, often since he was a puppy, and has bonded closely with them, only to be dropped off in a strange, lonely place never to see them again. No matter how well-run a shelter is, it is not equivalent to a home. A dog that is up for adoption does not get the attention it would get in a home, and the transition is not an easy one; everything familiar is gone, and replaced with an overwhelming flood of strange smells, sights, and sounds. No matter how well he seems to have adjusted to life at an adoption center, the trauma is still there. He will be eager to bond with a new “special person,” but when one family has left him behind, he may have developed an understandable fear that any person, no matter how much he loves them, will abandon him again.

How You Can Help

- Downplay arrivals and departures. Be calm, but upbeat; your dog will be frantic, but don’t encourage him. When you come home, go about your routine and ignore him for a few minutes before sitting down to pet him. It will be hard, because he’s so excited to see you, but it’s important to make your arrival and departure just like any other part of the day.

- Provide a security blanket. It doesn't necessarily have to literally be a blanket, of course – just something that smells like you. For the dog, it's a reminder that you're there, even when you're not. Almost anything will do, as long as it smells like you: an old t-shirt, or a fleece blanket you've slept with.
- Routine is everything! Every time you leave, go through the same steps. Try turning on the radio or the television every time you leave. Establish a verbal "safe phrase" that you say every time: it will become a trigger to reassure the dog that you're coming back. Consistency is absolutely key! Inconsistent treatment is what got the dog into its distressed frame of mind to begin with, and continued inconsistency will not do him any good.
- As part of your routine, try including special treats that will keep the dog occupied as long as possible. This is especially important with dogs who exhibit destructive chewing behavior, as it will provide them with an appropriate alternative to furniture. Try hard-rubber, hollow toys (Kong® toys are a great option) that can be filled with cheese, peanut butter, or leftovers from last night's dinner; if you freeze these and then give them to the dog as part of your departure routine, he will be occupied for quite a while trying to get the food out of the treat. Be sure to use dog-safe foods: absolutely no chocolate, onions, grapes, or raisins.

For Severe Cases...

If your dog seems to have a severe case of separation anxiety, a little extra effort may be needed. The most beneficial thing you can do is take the time to desensitize him to departures. Again, it's vital to have an established departure routine from which you don't deviate.

To desensitize your dog:

- Start your normal departure routine, then sit back down. Repeat until the dog stops showing distress.
- Increase your routine to opening the door, closing it again, and sitting back down. Again, repeat as necessary.
- Continue, but try stepping outside and closing the door before returning.
- Gradually work up to leaving for short spans of time: 10 minutes at first, and then longer and longer as his tolerance improves. Once he's doing alright with absences of 30-90 minutes, he'll probably be able to handle longer separation.
- You should also make a special effort to teach your dog "Sit" and "Stay" commands, using enthusiastic positive reinforcement. Once he has the commands down, tell

Dealing with separation anxiety can be time-consuming and frustrating, but don't give up. Keep a little compassion and patience in your heart, and remember that your dog is only acting out because of his fear of losing you. And above all, persevere! Maintain your daily routines, take time to work with your dog, and the end result will be amazing: that perfect dog you fell in love with will be there all the time, whether he's right by your side or not. And through it all, remember that you have a life-line: we are here to help, and so is your veterinarian. Never hesitate to call and ask for advice, we'll do whatever we can to help you make it work.

him to stay and then walk away, gradually increasing the distance between you; this will show him that he can be perfectly fine alone, and doesn't constantly need to be by your side. Once he can stay happily in a different room than you, with a door between you, he'll be well on the road to recovery.

Intermediate Solutions

For the average working adult, trying to really effectively help a dog with separation anxiety can be difficult: it can take time, and the idea of coming home to destroyed rooms every day is enough to give almost anyone an ulcer. In that intermediate time when you're working with your dog on his anxiety problems, but haven't quite gotten there yet, try leaving the dog with a friend or relative, or try a doggie day care; something to provide him with companionship and keep him out of trouble while you're away. As a very last resort, you can also consult your veterinarian about possible drug therapy, but keep in mind that this is not acceptable as a long-term solution. Daily sedation is like a band-aid on a broken leg, and while it may save some of your nicer furniture it will only further damage your dog's mental state. If you're at wit's end and sedation is the only thing you can manage, it may be better for you and for the dog if you find a different home for him.

Bad Ideas

Regardless what methods you decide to use to help your dog, there are some things that you should absolutely, under no circumstances, do with a dog suffering from separation anxiety.

- **Do Not** punish your dog for his destructive behavior. Separation anxiety can not be "trained" out of a dog; it is a panic response, and has nothing to do with what he knows is acceptable or unacceptable behavior.
- **Do Not** crate your dog. Much of the destructive behavior a dog with separation anxiety exhibits is directed at escape from confinement; tighter confinement will only serve to worsen his anxiety. He will most likely urinate and defecate in the crate, and may injure himself in attempts to get out.
- **Do Not** just leave the radio on, in hopes that it will be a quick-fix. You can't trick your dog into forgetting his anxiety. Putting on the radio or television when you leave is only effective as part of a larger, *consistent* departure routine.