

Solutions to Separation Anxiety

It's natural for dogs to form attachments to human and animal members of the household, but when does that attachment become destructive? Separation anxiety is a condition in which the dog displays excessive anxiety when apart from the people to whom he is attached. Signs may include destructive behavior to himself or items around the house, house soiling (even though the dog is reliably housetrained), excessive vocalization, barrier frustration (where the dog focuses destructive behavior at the door of his enclosure), and excessive restlessness at the owner's departure. Oftentimes this behavior is exhibited within fifteen to forty minutes of the owner's departure. With patience, separation anxiety can be prevented, managed, and even eradicated.

There are several influencing factors that potentially trigger separation anxiety. Dogs are very much routine-oriented, and changes in their routine can be stressful. For example, if your dog is accustomed to your being at home during the day and you begin a new job where you are no longer home as much. A permanent change in household members, including other animals, can also trigger separation anxiety, as this is a further alteration to their everyday routine. When bringing a new dog or puppy into the house, it is often on a weekend and owners tend to spend a lot of time with and around the dog. The owner then has to return to their normal routine of work, and it comes as a shock to the dog to then be left alone.

Some physical and behavioral problems carry similar symptoms to separation anxiety: urinary tract infections, loss of bladder control, parasites, digestive disorders, geriatric cognitive dysfunction, puppy exploration, teething, hunger, incomplete housetraining, marking behaviors, phobias, and more. These problems should be ruled out with a health examination from a veterinarian or an evaluation from a training and behavior specialist before beginning any treatment for separation anxiety.

Prognosis in treatment of separation anxiety is fair to good, but it is time intensive and requires patience and diligence by all members of household. One of the first steps is to eliminate attention initiated by your dog. If your dog comes to you displaying behaviors in order to receive attention from you, you must ignore it until he stops and then initiate attention when he is calm. Obedience exercises, like boundary stay

exercises, help with this because the dog must remain calmly in his designated place (a dog bed with distinct edges works well) until you decide to release him or reward him with attention. Attention or release from his boundary stay must be done only when the dog is calm and quiet, otherwise you will be reinforcing the behaviors you are trying to bring to an end. Your dog can have toys or do as he wants while in a boundary stay, as long as he remains there calmly and quietly. Another step is to separate yourself from your dog while you are home by utilizing a dog-proofed room or crate. Begin with short periods of time and gradually build in increments, only releasing your dog when he is calm and quiet. Both exercises help teach good independent behavior in or out of your presence.

When arriving home or leaving, downplay your greeting or departure so it doesn't seem like anything your dog should become stressed over. Cues that show your dog that you are leaving should also be downplayed or performed in different sequences to help minimize stress. For example, pick up your keys or open the garage door while you are still eating breakfast instead of it being your last action before you leave. Also try wearing work clothes at when you will be staying home, or wearing everyday clothes when you are leaving the house so your dog disassociates these cues as something stressful.

To help remove stress while you are away, find a toy that can be reserved to be given to your dog only when he is to be alone. Interactive toys that can be filled with food or treats work well because they help occupy the dog in an activity that he enjoys. Chewing is also an action that can offer some stress relief. This toy can act as a safety cue for your dog to indicate that you are leaving, but will return. It should be given only when you leave and taken up within ten minutes of your return.

Accustom your dog to being alone by practicing graduated departures several times a week. At a time you normally would be at home, dress as though you are going to work and go through your normal departure routine, even giving your dog the toy reserved for when he is left alone. Then leave your house, but return after a few minutes. (You might start at only a few seconds at first, depending on your dog.) Gradually increase the amount of time you are gone as your dog shows fewer signs of stress upon

your departure. This exercise should be done up to twice daily and at least three times a week for the best results.

Separation anxiety can be prevented in new young dogs with planning. Instead of constantly spending time with your new dog or puppy when he arrives home, make certain that you set aside some time that he will be left alone. This will better prepare him for his new routine, as well as let him know that you will return after being gone. (Crate training or using a dog proofed room works well.) Also provide your dog with interactive toys to give him something to do when he is to be alone. For example, provide your dog with several interactive toys filled with his meal portion before you leave home so that he has an activity to mentally stimulate him for most of the day. Establish a daily schedule for your dog that includes feeding, elimination, exercise, and training to accommodate his needs.

In cases of extreme separation anxiety, contact your veterinarian for advice on whether your dog would benefit from medication in conjunction to a behavioral treatment program. Clomicalm is the only FDA-approved medication for treatment of separation anxiety in dogs. It can aid in getting your dog into an appropriate emotional state that is conducive to a behavioral treatment strategy that may include the desensitization and counter conditioning steps described above.

Though a seemingly daunting issue, separation anxiety can be dealt with through diligence, consistency, and patience. A dog that is attached to you, yet can also be independent is the best scenario for you both.

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