



Separation Anxiety

Dogs are highly social animals. Their genetic programming is to be in a pack with other individuals 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They can learn to handle being alone for moderate periods of time but, in most cases, it doesn't come naturally. It's not surprising why some dogs develop separation anxiety, a disorder which, in its severe form, can consist of panic attacks: urinating, defecating, frantically scratching and chewing at doorframes, barking and crying whenever the dog is left alone.

Separation anxiety is often triggered by either a high contrast situation, months of the owner home all day followed by sudden eight-hour absences, or some sort of life change, like rehoming, a stay at a boarding kennel, a death of a key family member or major change in routine.

Separation anxiety is both preventable and responds well to treatment. The treatment approach depends on whether the case is mild or severe. The first step is recognizing that dogs with separation anxiety are not misbehaving out of boredom, spite or for fun. Some dogs with separation anxiety are fine for short periods of time as they have learned the difference between a long absence and a short absence. Others are anxious even for short durations.

Preventing Separation Anxiety

Puppies and newly adopted dogs are at higher risk to develop separation anxiety if they are smothered with constant attention their first few days home. It is much better to leave for brief periods extremely often so the dog's early learning about departures is that they are no big deal and predict easy, tolerable lengths of absence: "whenever she leaves, she comes back."

Give your dog both physical exercise and mental work to do. Not only does problem solving increase confidence and independence, but it is also mentally fatiguing and increases the likelihood that your dog will rest quietly when left alone. The more activities and toys are incorporated into their life, the less they will depend on human social contact as sole stimulation.

Soften the blow of your departures by providing extremely enticing stuffed toys for them to unpack. See our "Kong Toy Stuffing" handout for tips on improving your technique

Mild Separation Anxiety

Reduce the contrast between when you're gone and when you're home. Refrain from smothering them with affection, instead introduce stimulating activities like puzzles, tug of war, hide and seek, a lick mat or food stuffed toys. Regularly interrupt his shadowing you around the house continuously when you're home by baby-gating him into another room for short periods. This is like practicing a "semi-absence." Do many, many extremely brief (1 - 30 seconds) absences with no fanfare on departure or arrival. Increase physical exercise and mental stimulation.



Severe Separation Anxiety

In severe cases, the informal interventions above will usually not help. What's needed is a formal program of systematic desensitization to change the dog's deeply ingrained emotional reaction to departure. The track record of systematic desensitization is excellent for resolving separation anxiety, however it is a huge amount of work for the dog's caregiver!

The key is to observe the dog for the first signs of anxiety during the owner's usual ritual prior to leaving the house. Most dogs with severe separation anxiety start becoming anxious before the owner leaves. They have learned the "picture" associated with imminent departure and begin panting, pacing, salivating, whining or hiding. In fact, these symptoms of pre-departure anxiety are how separation anxiety can be distinguished from recreational chewing or behavior problems that result from dogs simply not understanding the rules or lacking outlets for their energy.

Once the kick-off point of the anxiety is found, treatment begins by repeatedly starting the ritual at this point but not adding the subsequent steps or leaving, to teach the dog to relax in the presence of the cues that formerly triggered anxiety.

Once the dog is relaxed, next steps in the ritual leading up to departure and, finally, real absences are gradually introduced, always contingent on the dog's continued relaxation. The dog is then, over time, worked back up to normal length absences. The hard part for the owner is that, for the duration of this treatment, the dog cannot experience absences in day-to-day life that are longer than the point he has reached in treatment exercises. This means essentially that, early on in treatment, the dog cannot be left alone. Owners typically employ dog-sitters, vacation time, doggie day-care and bringing the dog to work to manage this during treatment.

If you need more information or if you have additional questions, please call our support team at 602-273-6852 ext.105