



## Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Some dogs become extremely distressed when left alone. We refer to this as separation anxiety. There is a difference between separation anxiety and simply not liking it when his owners leave. Most dogs are not happy when their owner goes out the door to work each day, but they manage to get along during the day on their own. Dogs with separation anxiety don't do so well, and they can be a significant challenge for their owners.

The concern dogs with separation anxiety have about their owners leaving goes beyond simply missing you each day. Some behaviors these dogs may exhibit include:

- The dog scratches at the door you exit through, and may even destroy the woodwork or carpet or knock over items in the area.
- The dog whines and barks excessively and constantly when you leave, and may also drool and tremble. (Use a video camera to see what your dog does when you aren't home, or ask a neighbor to listen.)
- Some dogs may urinate or defecate in the house during your absences even if they are completely house trained.
- The dog may destroy your possessions, including shoes, clothing and furniture during your absence even if he doesn't do these things when you are at home.
- The dog may also exhibit some submissive urination when you come home.
- He follows you from room to room when you are home, never letting you out of his sight.
- He might beg for attention the entire time you're at home.
- The dog is extremely excited to see you when you return home.
- The dog may not tolerate being separated from you in another room or in a crate when you are home.
- The presence of a family member at home usually diminishes the symptoms of separation anxiety, but some dogs will have separation anxiety for only one person and are not satisfied with anyone else.
- Your preparations to leave the house bring on agitated behaviors from the dog such as panting, pacing, excessive drooling, pawing at you, leaning on you, or even trying to prevent you from leaving.

## What causes separation anxiety?

Usually separation anxiety is a combination of experiences that begins with not learning how to tolerate being alone when the dog is young. For example, if a dog is adopted as a puppy by a stay-at-home mother, but she returns to work when her children start school, the dog may begin to exhibit separation anxiety after several days of realizing they aren't coming back all day. Other dogs may have problems after being rehomed, after gaining or losing a family member to marriage, birth, death, divorce or when kids leave home to go to college or work. With other dogs it's hard to tell exactly what caused the problem.

## What can you do to help?

It seems logical to comfort a dog that is in so much obvious distress. Unfortunately coddling dogs with this kind of behavior often makes it worse. At the same time you don't want to be insensitive to his needs. It is never appropriate to punish a dog for his separation anxiety behaviors. This may cause them to worsen or may cause him to begin to behave aggressively.

### **At Home**

When you are at home with your dog, provide attention and petting for the most courageous of your dog's behaviors, and be very low key and confident when he is being clingy. The goal is to show him that there is nothing to be afraid of, and that being courageous brings good things to him! At first he may not be very confident at all, but reward being just a little bit more confident than usual with attention and praise, and perhaps a few treats.

### **Helping Him Understand that You'll Come Back**

Since this problem could continue for the rest of the dog's life if nothing is done, it is worthwhile to spend some time now to help the dog with his problem. Here's a way to help him understand that being left alone isn't too serious. Choose a day when you will be home all day. A whole weekend will be even better.

1. Pick up your keys. If the dog is behaving frantically, just continue to hold them, but don't go out the door. When he calms down, even just a little bit, put the keys down and go back to what you were doing. The goal is to show him that when he is calm, good things happen. When you put them down, be matter-of-fact and confident, not gushy with your dog.
2. Repeat this process over and over until he stops worrying about you picking up your keys, then add another piece of your "going out" routine, such as putting on a jacket. Pull the jacket on, then when the dog is calm, take it off and put it away. Repeat this as many times as it takes for him not to worry about it.
3. When the dog is okay with you putting your jacket on try opening the door an inch. Again, wait for him to be calmer, then close the door, take off your coat, put down your keys and stay inside. As you progress, wait for him to be calmer and calmer before coming back in.
4. Gradually work on opening the door wider each time without going outside until you can open it wide enough for you to fit through. When it's wide enough, take one step out, wait for the dog to calm down a bit, then come back in and take off all your stuff. Repeat until he is okay.
5. Gradually work up to going all the way out, closing the door, and if you don't hear anything for one second come back in. Repeat this until you can go out and close the door for gradually longer times.
6. Now that you can get out the door you'll build up how long you stay out, but remember to always come back in while he's being calm. If he begins to whine or bark you've waited too long.
7. Ultimately you will get in your car, start it and turn it off, before going back inside. Since you can't see your dog from the car you'll have to judge by what he's doing when you get back to the door as to whether it's time to go back inside.
8. Work up to driving down the driveway and around the block. Over time spend longer times away from home before coming back.

### **Another Pet**

Obtaining another pet is not something to undertake without thinking it through, but in some cases, adopting a second animal that is confident and mature can help. If you would like to consider this option, first try dog sitting for a friend that has a dog you know and see how it affects your dog. Some dogs are just fine when there is another animal in the house. This is why it is often difficult to identify dogs with separation anxiety in the shelter. They are never really alone.



If you try dog sitting and it helps your dog, look for an adult dog that is easy-going and confident. The ideal candidate would be older than your current dog, of a similar size, and of the opposite sex.

### **Using a Crate**

If your dog already uses a crate and considers it a safe haven, continue to use it, and follow the steps above with him inside the crate. Some dogs do worse when they are crated, so for those dogs start crate training from scratch using a clicker and treats so that it becomes a place he loves.

### **Join a Training Class**

Positive training methods like clicker training can help build a dog's confidence. Find a trainer that uses only positive methods for your dog with separation anxiety. Be sure to discuss his problem with the instructor to see if she has any recommendations.

### **Other Things to Try**

- Consider enrolling your dog in doggy daycare if you can afford it so that he will be with company all day.
- Invite a friend's dog over to spend the day with your dog if they get along well.
- Have a stay-at-home friend keep your dog during the day and swap off dog sitting with him or her.
- Bring your dog to work with you if that is allowed.
- Take your dog on a long walk before work and before you feed him so that he's hungry, then ready for a rest as you leave.
- White noise (a TV or radio set to static, or to soft gentle music, a sound machine that makes nature sounds, etc.) can help drown out noises that might be frightening when your dog is home alone.
- Hire a trainer who uses positive methods to come to your home to work with you and your dog.
- Make an appointment with your vet to discuss treatment options.