



What is Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety or fear of being left alone, is a behavioral problem that is common with dogs who have spent time in a shelter environment. Dogs are very social animals; they bond strongly with people and other animals. Certain dogs are more dependent on a particular person or other animal and can become terrified when left alone. Changes of routine or schedules can magnify the problem, increasing the dog's anxiety and fear.



Many people mistake boredom or lack of training with separation anxiety. Dogs who have not been trained on household rules are likely to chew up belongings. If a dog is not properly housetrained, accidents can occur. High energy dogs without sufficient exercise and stimulation, can become destructive or vocal. These are not necessarily due to separation anxiety.

Signs of Separation Anxiety

Most common:

- Continuous barking
- Defecation/urination
- Drooling
- Destructive behavior

Other signs:

- Chewing or digging
- Self-destructive behavior or excessive self-licking
- Desperate attempts to break out of the house or crate such as chewing up the door frame or bending the crate bars.
- Loss of appetite or vomiting
- Trembling or shaking
- Whining, pacing or resisting confinement at departure times

What to do?

Once it is determined that separation anxiety is an issue, certain protocols can help. It is important to realize that it may take several months for the dog to become comfortable being alone. If neighbors are complaining or the dog is extremely uncomfortable, seek the help of a veterinarian or veterinarian behaviorist immediately. In the meantime, it may be necessary to find a family member, doggy sitter or daycare arrangement.

Remember that the dog is extremely fearful when left alone and punishment will not help. It can even exacerbate the problem by adding an extra layer of distress for the dog. The following tips may help alleviate the dog's anxiety:

1. Exercise; long walks (or runs), at least 30 minutes to an hour twice a day, will provide the dog with mental stimulation and exercise. Agility, nose work games, playing fetch in the yard or obedience classes are additional ways to provide physical and mental stimulation.
2. Train the dog to relax on a mat or bed, *See Relaxation Protocol. Teaching the dog to stay on a mat or bed can help prevent clingy, dependent behavior. Be sure to give the dog a long-lasting chew toy while on the mat.
3. Acclimate the dog to a crate before leaving it alone, *See Crate Training Protocol. Once the dog is comfortable in the crate, leave it alone with several short sessions of crate time without leaving the house. Always provide the dog with something to chew on or a fun puzzle toy.
4. Make all interactions with the dog on a command-response-reward basis. *See Simple Ways to Manage Your Dog's Behavior Protocol. This is also known as the "Nothing in Life is Free" or the "Say, Please" program and will help to make the dog more independent by ignoring demanding or attention-seeking behaviors.
5. Everyone in the family should keep arrivals and departures low-key by ignoring the dog 15 minutes before leaving the house (after giving the dog a stuffed Kong or bully stick to work on). When returning home, ignore the dog until it settles. If the dog needs to go out to relieve itself immediately, take it out without any extra petting, handling or excitement.
6. Outdoor noises can also increase a dog's anxiety. Leaving on a radio, television, or white noise machine can help to drown out some of these noises. If crating or confinement is being utilized, keep the dog away from windows or doors in a quiet part of the house.
7. Keep to a regular routine as much as possible. Dog's with separation anxiety like predictability.
8. Invest in a pet camera to monitor the dog's response to being alone. Having a video of the dog's behavior can help a veterinarian behaviorist with a treatment plan.

Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning

Make a list of things that are done prior to departure that cue the dog. For example, picking up keys, packing a purse or putting on a coat. To desensitize the dog to these triggers, try randomly picking up the keys, but go nowhere. Or, put on a coat and walk around the house. Done randomly throughout the day, the dog will soon learn that these triggers do not predict departure.

Counter-conditioning is changing a dog's emotional response by pairing the trigger to the departure with something the dog finds pleasant. Give the dog its favorite treat and then pick up the keys. Repeat this several times and then, reverse it. Pick up your keys and then give the dog's favorite treat.

To counter-condition the dog's fear of the departure itself, try tossing a hand full of the dog's favorite treats and then step out the door for a few minutes while it is eating the treats. Always plan your exits while the dog is busy with a favorite treat, stuffed Kong or bully stick. Increase departure times slowly from a few minutes to 15 minutes, to 30 minutes and so on until the dog is comfortable.

Desensitization and counter-conditioning require owner commitment and are very time consuming. Support from a veterinarian behaviorist and medications that alleviate panic and anxiety may be necessary. Generally, it is the combination of the two that lead to success.