

Separation Anxiety

Let's look at separation anxiety from your dog's perspective. You are one of the most important parts of your dog's life. Dogs are social creatures and thrive on companionship. If given the choice, many dogs would spend most of their time with their people. When you leave, a dog may experience varying degrees of distress and anxiety because they do not understand where you are going, why they cannot come with you, or when you will return.

Punishment is never the answer to treating dog separation anxiety.

Does Your Dog Suffer From Separation Anxiety?

Your dog may be experiencing separation anxiety rather than another behavior problem if:

- Your dog becomes very anxious when you prepare to leave the house. Picking up keys, putting on a coat, or other departure cues may trigger the behavior.
- Your dog engages in inappropriate behavior primarily when separated from you. Urinating indoors, excessive barking, and destructive behavior can be signs of separation anxiety.
- Your dog follows you everywhere and becomes distressed when unable to stay near you.
- When you return home, your dog gives an over-the-top greeting and takes a while to calm down.

Why Do Dogs Suffer From Separation Anxiety?

There are many possible causes. Sometimes the trigger can be linked to a particular event, while in other cases there may be no obvious explanation. Separation anxiety can occur:

- After a change in routine, such as a change in work hours or a family member leaving home.
- After a period when you have spent much more time than usual with your dog, followed by a return to a normal work or school schedule.
- In dogs adopted from shelters or rescue situations.
- After a frightening or traumatic event while the dog was alone, such as a severe thunderstorm.
- When a dog is rarely left alone and becomes overly dependent on constant companionship.
- After moving to a new home or neighborhood.

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How Does Dog Separation Anxiety Manifest Itself?

- Barking
- Whining
- Excessive licking
- Destructive behavior
- Chewing
- Howling
- Panic behavior
- Digging
- Inappropriate urination
- House soiling
- Self-injury
- Escaping
- Diarrhea
- Loss of appetite
- Excessive salivation
- Vomiting
- Attempting to escape through doors or windows
- Crying

What Can You Do To Help Your Dog Overcome Separation Anxiety?

The approach used to address separation anxiety depends on its severity. The following gradual training process is based on the method described in the original handout. Progress takes time and patience. Continue providing normal daily care, including a safe and comfortable resting place, exercise, enrichment, and basic training.

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A 4-Step Gradual Training Program

Step 1

Teach your dog that they do not always need to be right beside you. Begin with very short periods of calm separation while you are still at home. Practice cues such as down and stay, and gradually increase the time and distance apart. Continue spending plenty of positive, enjoyable time together.

Step 2

Gradually practice being physically separated while remaining nearby. Start with only a few seconds and reunite before your dog shows signs of anxiety. Slowly increase the duration over time. A treat or engaging toy can help occupy your dog. Initiate attention when your dog is calm and quiet.

Step 3

Identify the cues that signal you are about to leave, such as putting on shoes, picking up keys, turning off the TV, or putting on a coat. Practice these actions without leaving. Repeating departure cues without an actual departure can gradually reduce the dog's anxious response to them.

Separation Anxiety

Step 4

When your dog remains calm around the usual departure cues, begin very short departures. Step outside and return before your dog becomes distressed. Gradually increase the time away. You can provide a long-lasting food toy or treat as you leave. When you return, keep your arrival calm rather than creating a highly emotional reunion.

This is a gradual process. Do not expect immediate results. If your dog's separation anxiety is severe, persistent, or involves self-injury or dangerous escape attempts, consult your veterinarian or a qualified behavior professional for additional guidance.

Other Helpful Strategies

- Provide toys or food puzzles that keep your dog engaged during your absence.
- Leave a radio or TV on if background sound seems comforting to your dog.
- Provide appropriate exercise before you leave.
- Crate train only if the crate is a comfortable, safe space for your dog. Do not leave a dog crated if confinement increases anxiety.
- Reinforce basic cues such as sit, down, and stay, gradually increasing duration and distance with positive reinforcement.
- Arrange for a dog walker, sitter, or visitor to break up a long day alone.