



Separation Anxiety (SA) Assessment, Prevention and Therapy

Separation Anxiety (SA) Disorder is both a devastating condition for your dog and a heart-wrenching experience for pet parents. Separation Anxiety is a stress-related disorder and fear reaction to being left alone. When left alone, dogs who suffer with SA experience what is akin to a panic attack in humans. SA is largely a result of over-attachment to pet parents, or to a canine littermate or house-mate. If a dog is overly attached to a human, generally, getting another dog will not solve the problem. In most cases the dog has become habituated to continual contact with the pet parent and has simply not learned how to be alone. The good news is that it can often be avoided in puppies by becoming a pro-active trainer and taking steps to encourage your clients' dogs to be secure and independent. Start early in a dog's life with separation anxiety prevention.

Dogs that are particularly susceptible to developing separation related issues and are at risk of becoming over-attached to pet parents:

- Puppies

- Dogs that live with pet parents who work from home

- Dogs whose pet parents are retired

- New rescue dogs. Rescue dogs often suffer from SA as a result of being abandoned and from the oftentimes scary and lonely experience at a shelter. Although rescue volunteers generally do a wonderful job of rehoming dogs, avoiding SA can be an especially tough challenge for a rescue dog.

Sadly, some dogs develop separation anxiety for the first time when "left" in a kennel while pet parents go away on vacation or business.

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There may be a factor of genetically-driven, breed-related predispositions. It is not well-understood why some dogs suffer from separation anxiety and others don't, even when pups are from the same litter with similar puppyhood experiences.

Can It Be Treated?

Separation anxiety is often a "learned" response and can therefore be "unlearned" in most cases. Sadly, it's not often an easy fix.

Separation anxiety is responsive to treatment *if* a customized and consistent plan of treatment is put in place, demonstrated by the trainer, and practiced by the pet parents. The hallmark of this training is "baby-steps," that is, incremental systematic desensitization.

With Separation Anxiety we are treating an issue of "insecurity" and fear, so building confidence in the dog is the key to recovery. General manners/obedience training is recommended because training increases confidence. Building confidence in dogs is similar to building self-esteem and self-efficacy in people.

Finding the healthy balance between

Social proximity to the pet parent

Independence from the pet parent

will help enable your client's dog to enjoy being a dog and to become a "happy camper".

Assessment

Here are some questions to ask the client to determine the severity of the SA issue or disorder.

How many hours per day do you generally spend with your dog?

How many hours per day is your dog left alone?

How old is your dog now? How old was your dog when you first began noticing symptoms?

Was there an event, such as a vacation spent together, or being home with you for a long period of time, after which your dog developed symptoms?

Was there a change in the family routine, family structure, or family location?

Was there a traumatic event (such as kenneling) that preceded the symptoms?

Does your dog greet you frantically if you've been gone just a short while?

Does your dog follow you around from room to room throughout the day?

Does your dog dislike spending time alone outside?

What Happens *Before* You Leave the House?

How long before you leave the house does your dog show signs of stress related to your leaving?

Please describe the precise chain of emotional events that occur in your dog before you

leave your home.

What are the signs of your dog's anxiety before you leave the house?

Sadness

Worried look

Panting

Pacing

Following you on your heels

Crying/whining

Other

What Happens *After* You Leave the House?

If you don't know what your dog does after you leave the house, find out. "Sneak up" on your dog by quietly peering into a window to see and hear what is going on in your absence. A remote or stationary video camera is also great for gathering this information. Mac users can easily take video of what happens using the PhotoBooth program.

How long after you leave does your dog show symptoms of separation anxiety?

What are the signs of your dog's anxiety after you leave the house?

Self-mutilation

Incessant barking or crying (but not boredom)

Trembling

Destructive behavior (but not boredom)

Defecation or urination in the house even though otherwise housetrained

Chewing or scratching at windows, doors, or other exit routes

Attempts to escape to find you

Wet coat or sweating

Drooling

Repetitive pacing

Immobility, such as staring out the window or sitting at the door the entire time you are away

Frantic greeting although you were gone for just a short while

If your dog has more than one of the above symptoms, a diagnosis of separation anxiety disorder is possible.

What Exactly Do *You* Do Before You Leave the House? Triggers!

What are the possible "triggers" that set your dog's stress reaction in motion?

Rushing around?

Jangling your keys?

Putting on your coat?

Picking up a purse and/or briefcase?

Leaving your dog with a worried "Goodbye"?

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Closing the door?
Sound of car leaving?
Other



Prevention and Therapy Trainer Protocol/Checklist/Handout For Your Clients

Establishing or reestablishing trust that you will return is the goal. The treatment plan will show your dog that it's "okay to be alone" because your dog can *trust* that you will always return.

Dogs are social creatures and need social contact. If your job keeps you away for long stretches of time, find a dog-friendly alternative to leaving your dog home alone all day.

- A pet sitter can provide daily visits

- A doggie day care facility may be an option

- Perhaps you can take your dog to work with you when possible.

Leaving your dog alone all day is without question hard on your dog emotionally. Additionally, dogs shouldn't be left alone for more than 5 hours if they don't have elimination opportunities as this may create medical problems if your dog withholds urination.

All behavior modification programs are two-sided coins:

- You need to begin to do the things that will help your dog and your family, and

- STOP doing the things that will work against success.

Each side of the coin is equally important.

A well-structured change in routine may break the cycle of anxiety if practiced carefully and consistently. Try to keep your dog's best long-term interest in mind.

Never punish. Punishment won't help, regardless of what may have happened in your absence, but it will make an already anxiety-stricken dog even more insecure.

Greetings and goodbyes. Get your dog off the adrenaline roller-coaster! We want to close the emotional gap between your presence and your absence, and make your

physical presence or absence less emotionally loaded with joy or panic. Forgo the enthusiastic greetings and eliminate the long, sad goodbyes.

Don't talk to, pet, or give eye-contact to your dog for approximately 15 minutes before you leave and for 15 minutes after you arrive home. **Make your arrivals home boring.** Deliver your greeting *after* your dog has calmed down. Routinely check your email for example, while your dog calms down after you arrive home. Often, the best part of coming home is the greeting pet parents get from their dog. Your dog is thrilled that you are home. However, in order to prevent separation anxiety, it's best to save the effusive greetings until after your dog has calmed down. Don't add kindling to an already raging emotional fire. □

Make your departures from home calmly upbeat. If you are sad as you leave, your dog will not understand why. She/he will just know that "something's wrong with Mommy" and it will serve to trigger or stoke the panic. Use an upbeat tone when you leave. □

Doggie Disneyland® Containment. Set your dog up for success by using a containment system...**but not locked in a crate.** The use of a crate for SA is generally contraindicated. Self-mutilation and injury is not uncommon for panic-stricken dogs left locked in a crate. There is a possibility that your dog could find an open, covered crate a security blanket.

Separation trials

Exercise your dog before leaving her/him alone. Wear him out with a lure-chase toy if you can't walk/run.

Make sure she/he has complete elimination opportunities before you leave.

Provide frequent separations while you are *at home*. Make separations a part of your dog's routine. Start small and build confidence slowly and incrementally. Begin frequent, short, separations indoors first *while you're at home*, behind a closed door and/or with your dog in a "Doggie Disneyland®" enclosure you've created for just this purpose. Too much space can cause your dog to feel insecure. Make your dog's "room" as comfortable and happy as possible. See photos below.





Start with “pass-bys”. Allow your dog to get a glimpse of you...but don’t provide any attention once you’ve established that it is now “alone time”. A systematic process of desensitization of “being okay alone” for longer and longer durations is required. Once your dog can tolerate your absence from 30 - 90 minutes, your dog will generally be fine for the morning or afternoon.

The desensitization process begins with practice sessions of very short durations. Time is increased in small increments as small as 10-seconds if necessary. Build up to 15 minutes, and graduate to 1-1.5 hours of “alone time” 3x a day, every day, for life. This will be slow going at first, but the length of “okay alone” time can increase quickly as learning progresses.

No following. Don’t allow your dog to follow you around the house all day if your dog has SA. Arranging your Dog Zone or separate area where your dog can “play house” while you are in another room is good for your dog and for you in the long term. Allow your dog to practice being independent! **Close the door.** Keep your dog on the other side of a closed door inside the home for short periods each day, starting with the bathroom. A barrier between you and your dog will begin the process of healing from Separation Anxiety. If your dog tries to follow you into the bathroom, for example, don’t allow it. Just gently close the door between you and your dog. You may talk to your dog through the door if it keeps the symptoms from developing or provide a Comfort Item. Then, discontinue the talking.

Provide comfort items. *You* are the ultimate Comfort Item...but unfortunately you are also the “trigger” perpetuating unhealthy emotional dependency.

1. **Grazing Games. Use Food!** Dogs *love* food. Dogs require food to survive. Food can change the emotional state of your dog. Don’t underestimate the power of food to change emotions and *how* your dog feels about being alone. Scatter high-value food ([Ziwi-Peaks](#) for example) all over the floor of your Doggie Dineyland® space. Hide some pieces. Be sure no pieces go underneath the furniture in places not easily accessible.
2. **Stimulate your dog.** Leave your dog with something to do. We all need something to do. Leave *home alone only* favorite chew items and long-lasting food toys in the “dog zone”. Provide high-value chew items that she/he gets **ONLY** when you leave. Provide chew toys and bones such as a stuffed Kong®.

- bully stick, or esophagus with wet food stuffed into it. **See Chew This, Not That.**
3. **Provide a view** of the great outdoors. Your dog could be suffering from a condition that is often mistaken for separation anxiety – *boredom!*
 4. Leave your dog with favorite safe, **squeaky, plush toys** he gets *only* when you are away.
 5. **Your scent.** Leave your dirty/sweaty t-shirt, or dirty socks. These scent-oriented items can help your dog feel that you are not so far away.
 6. **Bedding.** If your dog has chewed her bed, get a zippered bed, remove the stuffing and replace with your old, worn, unwashed clothes. The bed will “smell like you” and will help prevent your dog from destroying bedding and creating a mess.
 7. Leave the **radio** on to a station that is very calming, such as NPR or an easy listening music station.
 8. Leave a **TV** on to a cooking channel or shopping channel...where nothing disturbing *ever* happens!
 9. Get a **“voice toy”** with a recording loop of your voice saying a few pleasantries to your dog. I like the ones that either “talk” when your dog moves them or “talk” once every 5 minutes or so. Try the I Calm for Separation Anxiety.
 10. A warm **towel** right out of the dryer can help, too.

Establish a “Safety Cue”. Stand in front of your dog in the enclosure and say “I’ll Be Back.” Turn you back, then immediately turn to face your dog again, saying in a calm voice, “I’m Back”. Practice in 4 three-minute sessions per day.

Increase Distance, Duration and Distraction incrementally and separately.

Later, practice this technique in different locations.

Then, always leave him with your upbeat “tag line”, “I’ll be back”, once he trusts that you will be back, as your parting gesture.

Your dog can benefit greatly from this practice that helps, prevents, and treats separation anxiety disorder.

Practice “Sit/Wait” and “Down/Wait” while leaving the room, for 10, 20, 30 seconds + and say, “I’ll be back”. Practice “sit/wait” and “down/wait” while you leave the room for just a moment. Patience and practice is needed to reach this level. Don’t ever put your dog in a long wait with nothing to do. We aren’t practicing parlor tricks, but treating a debilitating disorder. **Stop sleeping with your dog in your bed.** If your dog is suffering from separation anxiety and you sleep with your dog in your bed — stop. This is very hard for some pet parents. Snuggle together in bed if you like but when it’s time to sleep, have your dog sleep in her own bed, perhaps on the floor next to you but not in your bed.

Desensitization to triggers. Change the emotional meaning of the triggers that heretofore have been predictors of you leaving the house. Desensitization begins with practice sessions where you perform the tasks you have done before you leave the house...but you don’t leave the house!

Desensitizing triggers will change the emotional impact of triggers on your dog. For example, if jangling your keys is not always followed by you leaving the house, the key jangling will no longer be a signal to your dog that you are leaving. Your dog cannot

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produce a continual stream of adrenaline for a long period of time. Your dog will eventually hear the jangle as background noise, more or less, and stop *associating* jangling keys with being left alone. If you sit down on the sofa and watch TV while jangling your keys frequently, the triggers will in time lose their power to generate fear and anxiety. The same learning principal applies to other triggers. Mix it up.

1. Pick up keys, go to the door, but don't go out the door. Repeat again and again.
1. Then, open and close the door. Repeat.
2. Then, step outside, close the door, and come back inside after about 3 seconds. Increase your "away time" in small increments.
3. Add walking to the car.
4. Starting the car.
5. Driving off for 10 minutes, etc.

Turn triggers, such as putting on your coat, picking up a purse or briefcase, and jangling keys, into *neutral events* for your dog by *preparing to* leave but don't leave the house.

Please be certain your dog is successful at being alone before adding the next level of difficulty in terms of Duration and Distance.

If you continue to have trouble or if your dog has more than one of the following symptoms, continue working with your force-free behavioral consultant:

Self-mutilation

Incessant barking or crying (but not boredom)

Trembling

Destructive behavior (but not boredom)

Defecation or urination in the house even though otherwise housetrained

Chewing or scratching at windows, doors, or plaster board

Attempts to escape to find you

Wet coat or sweating

Drooling

Repetitive pacing

Immobility, such as staring out the window or sitting at the door the entire time you are away

Frantic greeting although you were gone for just a short while

Persistent following

NOTE: Severe cases of Separation Anxiety that do not respond to a consistently applied behavioral modification program may require the use of medication to keep your dog from injuring him/herself while having the SA panic attack. Medication AND a behavior modification program should always go hand-in-hand. It is ill-advised to employ pharmaceutical treatment without implementing a behavioral modification protocol, please consult your veterinarian for medication options if you believe your dog may be in danger. Prozac is on-label for SA in dogs.

Remember, your dog cannot self-report on the effects of medication, and in some cases there are undesirable side-effects such as paradoxical (opposite) side-effects.