

# Separation Anxiety

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Some dogs may become distressed and may urinate, defecate, bark, chew, dig or try to escape when left alone. This does not mean they are not house trained, but more likely signs of separation anxiety. Separation anxiety is triggered when dogs become upset because of separation from their guardians.

There is no conclusive evidence showing exactly why dogs develop separation anxiety. However, it is believed that loss of an important person or group of people in a dog's life can lead to separation anxiety. The following is a list of situations that have been associated with development of separation anxiety.

- Being abandoned, surrendered to a shelter or given to a new guardian or family.
- Moving to a new residence can trigger the development of separation anxiety.
- The sudden absence of a resident family member, either due to death or moving away.

## **What to Do If Your Dog Has Separation Anxiety**

There are varying degrees of separation anxiety, however, if you do not work with your dog to manage these behaviours, they can quickly escalate. The following are methods you can use to treat different levels of anxiety.

### **Treatment for Mild Separation Anxiety**

Counterconditioning is a treatment process that changes an animal's fearful, anxious or aggressive reaction to a pleasant, relaxed one instead. It's done by associating the sight or presence of a feared or disliked person, animal, place, object or situation with something the dog loves.

For dogs with separation anxiety, counterconditioning focuses on developing an association between being alone and good things. To develop this kind of association, every time you leave the house, you can offer your dog a puzzle toy stuffed with food that will take him at least 20 to 30 minutes to finish. Be sure to remove these special toys as soon as you return home so that your dog only has access to them when he's by himself.

Keep in mind, though, that this approach will only work for mild cases of separation anxiety because highly anxious dogs usually won't eat when their guardians aren't home.

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## **Treatment for Moderate to Severe Separation Anxiety**

Moderate or severe cases of separation anxiety require a more complex desensitization and counterconditioning program. In these cases, it's crucial to gradually accustom a dog to being alone by starting with many short separations that do not produce anxiety and then gradually increasing the duration of the separations over many weeks of daily sessions. Here are 2 steps that you can try to lessen the separation anxiety behaviour.

### ***Step One: Pre-departure Cues***

One treatment approach to this “predeparture anxiety” is to teach your dog that when you pick up your keys or put on your coat, it doesn't always mean that you're leaving. You can do this by exposing your dog to these cues in various orders several times a day—without leaving. For example, put on your boots and coat, and then just watch TV instead of leaving. Or pick up your keys, and then sit down at the kitchen table for awhile.

This will reduce your dog's anxiety because these cues won't always lead to your departure. Be aware in order to learn that the cues no longer predict your long absences, your dog must experience the fake cues many, many times a day for many weeks. After your dog doesn't become anxious when he sees you getting ready to leave, you can move on to the next step.

### ***Step Two: Graduated Departures/Absences***

The main rule is to plan your absences to be shorter than the time it takes for your dog to become upset. Teach your dog to sit or stay while you go to the other side of the bathroom door then gradually increase the length of time you wait on the other side of the door. At this point, you can start to incorporate very short absences into your training.

Start with absences that last one to two seconds, and then slowly increase the time you're out of your dog's sight. After each short separation, it's important to make sure that your dog is completely relaxed before you leave again and to behave in a very calm, quiet manner when going out and coming in. This will lower the contrast between times when you're there and times when you're gone.



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This treatment process will take time, but can be accomplished within a few weeks. You should conduct several daily sessions on the weekends and twice-daily sessions during the work week, usually before leaving for work and in the evenings.

Remember, exercising your dog's mind and body can greatly enrich his life. Providing physical and mental stimulation can reduce anxiety and provide appropriate outlets for normal dog behaviours. Give your dog at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity every day. Try to exercise your dog right before you have to leave him by himself. This might help him relax and rest while you're gone. Interact with your dog by playing fetch and tug-a-war, as a mentally tired dog will unlikely have excess energy to expend when he's left alone.

The use of medications can be very helpful for severe cases of separation anxiety. Some dogs are so distraught by any separation from their pet guardians that treatment can't be implemented without the help of medication.

Always consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist before giving your dog any type of medication for a behavior problem.