

Pet Health Articles



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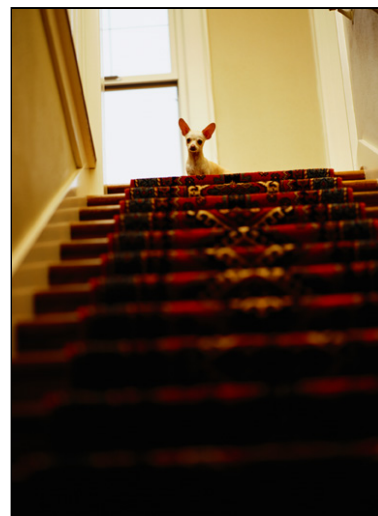
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Separation Anxiety in Dogs

How do I know if my dog's problem is due to separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety describes dogs that usually are overly attached or dependent on family members. They become extremely anxious and show distress behaviors such as vocalization, destruction, or house soiling when separated from the owners. Most dogs with separation anxiety try to remain close to their owners, follow them from room to room and rarely spend time outdoors alone. They often begin to display anxiety as soon as the owners prepare to leave. Many but not all of these dogs crave a great deal of physical contact and attention from their owners. During departures or separations, in addition to vocalization, destruction and elimination, they may be restless, shake, shiver, salivate, refuse to eat, or become quiet and withdrawn. Although typically the behavior occurs every time the owner leaves, in some cases it may only happen on selected departures, such as workday departures, or when the owner leaves again after coming home from work. Dogs with separation anxiety are also often quite excited and aroused when the owner returns.

Separation anxiety might be prevented by ensuring that puppies have scheduled times where they learn to spend time alone in their own crates or beds. Some dogs appear to have separation anxiety but are afraid to be home alone because something bad has happened to them while alone (e.g., storms, fireworks). Dogs that have both separation anxiety and noise or storm phobias will need treatment for both problems.



Are there other reasons that my dog may engage in these behaviors?

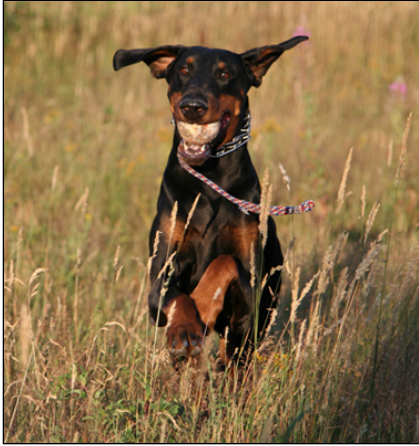
Dogs with separation anxiety vocalize, become destructive, or eliminate beginning either as the owners prepare to leave or shortly after departure. Destructive activity is often focused on owner possessions, or at the doors where owners depart or the dog is confined, and most often occurs shortly after departure. The vocalization is due to distress and may therefore consist of howling or whining. If the dog destroys, vocalizes, or eliminates both while the owners are at home and when they are away, other causes should first be considered. Dogs that eliminate when owners are at home may not be completely house trained or may have a medical problem. If the destruction, elimination and vocalization are more likely to arise the longer the owners are away from home, it may be that they are being left alone too long. Barking when the owners are away could be due to the sounds of strangers or other animals on the property. Some dogs will attempt to escape or become extremely anxious when confined, so that destructiveness or house soiling when a dog is locked up in a crate, basement, or laundry room, may be due to confinement or barrier anxiety and associated attempts at escape.

"...make an audiotape or movie clip
of the behavior when the dog is alone."

These dogs should be assessed to see if they act in the same way when they are confined while the owner is at home. In other situations fear or anxiety due to an external event (construction, storms, fireworks) may trigger destructive behaviors. Old dogs with medical problems such as loss of hearing or sight, painful conditions and cognitive dysfunction may become more anxious in general, and seek out the owner's attention for security and relief. Perhaps the best way to determine if the behaviors are due to the anxiety associated with the owner's departure is to make an audiotape or movie clip of the behavior when the dog is alone.

Where do I start?

Before you can begin, be certain that your dog has a sufficiently enriched environment and a predictable daily routine (see [Using Enrichment, Predictability, and Scheduling to Train Your Dog](#)). In addition, all rewards should be identified to ensure that they are only being given for those behaviors that you want to train and not for attention seeking or following. In other words, you should use the very rewards that your dog is seeking to teach independent behavior and to spend time relaxing away from you (see [Using Predictable Rewards to Train Your Dog](#)). Until you can get your dog to settle and relax while you are at home, he is unlikely to settle when you leave.



The steps you need to follow are:

1. Establish a predictable routine

Since your dog is anxious, you need to begin by making his day calmer and more predictable whether you are home or away. Establish a daily routine so that your dog can begin to predict when he can expect attention (including exercise, feeding, training, play and elimination) and when he should be prepared for inattention (when it should be napping or playing its favored toys). Try to schedule these times for object play and naps at times when you would normally depart.

2. Environmental enrichment – meeting your dog's needs

During the times when you are interacting with your dog, make sure that you are meeting all of his needs for social interactions, play, exercise, training, and elimination.

In effect, you should initiate enough regular interactive sessions and provide enough play and attention so that when each session is over, your dog is prepared to settle down and relax. At this point, new exploratory and chew toys can be given so that your dog has novel and motivating toys on which to focus when it is time to settle. Feeding toys can also replace standard food bowls to make feeding time more of a mental and physical effort.

3. Establish a predictable protocol for rewards

If your dog has separation anxiety, it's likely that your dog's favored rewards are the attention and play that you provide. Treats, food, play and chew toys may also be highly desirable.

"What behavior does my pet need to learn and what behavior should I never reinforce?"

Take each of your dog's most valuable rewards and ask yourself: "What behavior does my dog need to learn?" and "What behavior should I never reinforce?" With separation anxiety you must reinforce your dog for settling down, relaxing and showing some independence, while attention seeking and following behaviors should never be reinforced. Therefore, training should focus on extended and relaxed down stays and going to a bed or mat on command (see [Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training](#)). If your dog seeks attention, you should either ignore your dog entirely until he settles, or have him do a down-stay or go to his mat. After sufficient time in the down-stay or on the mat, give attention or affection as a reward. Gradually shape longer periods of inattention before attention is given. The goal is not to ignore the dog, but rather to ignore attention-seeking behaviors. You want your dog to learn that calm and quiet behavior is the only way to receive attention.

4. Train "settle" (see [Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training](#)).

The goal of training is that your dog learns to settle comfortably on cue. Focus on having your dog in a settled down, or lying on his bed or mat (or crate) before you give any reward. Not only should attention-seeking behavior be ignored, but all casual interactions should be avoided for the first few weeks, so that it is clear to both you and your dog that a settled response achieves rewards and attention seeking does not. Practice down stays and mat exercises using food lures, clicker training or head halter training, whichever is most effective. Gradually shape longer stays and longer times on the bed or mat before attention, affection, treats or play is earned.

5. Develop an area and surface for relaxation

Having a bed or mat location (in a room, pen, or crate) where your dog can be taught to rest, nap, play with his toys or even sleep, can provide a secure area where your dog might settle when you are not home. You can begin by training your dog to go to the area and gradually shape longer stays and more relaxed responses in the area before rewards are given. It might be helpful to have a barricade, tie down or crate that could be closed to ensure that your dog remains in the area for long enough at each session

before being released. On the other hand, know your dog's limits; your dog must be calm and settled when released so as to avoid reinforcing crying or barking behavior. At first, your dog can be taken to this area as part of his training routine using a toy or treat as a lure, or by using a leash and head halter. In time, a daily routine should be established where the dog learns to lie on his mat after each exercise, play and training session to either nap or play with his own toys. This is similar to the routine for crate training, where the mat or bed becomes the dog's bed or playpen. Other than play, exercise and training sessions, focus on giving your dog some or all of his rewards (treats, toys, chews, affection, feeding toys) only in this area. Audible cues such as a radio or TV; odors such as aromatherapy candles or a piece of clothing with the owner's scent; and a comfortable bed can help to promote a relaxed response since they are associated with relaxation and owner presence (non-departure).

6. Work on responses to simple commands.

For some dogs, it is also useful to have them earn all things. This can be as simple as having the dog respond to a command such as "sit" before receiving anything he wants. For example, if your dog asks to go outside, prior to opening the door the dog is given the command to "sit," and once he complies, the door is opened. This technique can be used for anything the dog desires.

When I need to leave, what can I do immediately to prevent damage?

This is an extremely difficult question. The goal of treatment is to reduce your dog's level of anxiety by training her to feel comfortable in your absence. This can be a long process.

**"Most owners will need to deal with
the damage or vocalization immediately."**

Yet, most owners will need to deal with the damage or vocalization immediately. During initial retraining it may be best to hire a dog sitter, take your dog to work, find a friend to care for your dog for the day, board her for the day, or arrange to take some time off from work during retraining. Crate training or dog proofing techniques may work for those dogs that already have an area where they are used to being confined. For dogs with separation anxiety, crates should be used with caution because they can promote intense escape attempts and may result in fairly serious injuries. It is important to choose a room or area that does not further increase your dog's anxiety. Your dog's bedroom or feeding area may therefore be most practical. Booby traps might also be used to keep the dog away from potential problem areas (see [Using Punishment Effectively](#)). For vocalization, anti-bark devices may be useful in the short term (see [Barking in Dogs](#)), but your dog will continue to remain anxious; for some dogs, the motivation to vocalize may be too strong for these products to be effective. Anti-anxiety drugs and pheromones may also be useful for short-term use, until the owner has effectively corrected the problem.

How can mydog be retrained so that it is less anxious during departures?

Since the underlying problem is anxiety, try to reduce all forms of anxiety prior to departure, at the time of departure, and at the time of homecoming. In addition, your dog must learn to accept progressively longer periods of inattention and separation while you are at home.

What should be done before departures?

Before any lengthy departure, provide a vigorous session of play and exercise. This not only helps to reduce some of your dog's energy and tire her out, but also provides a period of attention. A training session can also be a productive way to further interact and "work" with your dog. For the final 15 to 30 minutes before departure, your dog should be ignored. It would be best if your dog were taken to her rest and relaxation area with a radio, TV, or video playing (as above). You can then prepare for departure while your dog is out of sight and earshot. At this point, provide your dog with some new motivating toys to keep her occupied and distracted before and during your departure. The key is to avoid as many of the departure cues as possible, so that your dog's anxiety doesn't heighten before you leave. Brushing teeth, changing into work clothes, or collecting keys, purse, briefcase or school books, are all routines that might be able to be performed out of sight of the dog. You might also consider changing clothes at work, preparing and packing a lunch the night before, or even leaving the car at a neighbor's so your dog wouldn't hear the car pulling out of the driveway.

**"Avoid saying goodbye since this will
only serve to bring attention to the departure."**

Avoid saying goodbye because this will only serve to bring attention to the departure. Another alternative is to expose your dog to as many of these cues as possible while you remain at home so that they no longer are predictive of departure (see below).

What should I do if I come home to a mess?

If your dog has been anxious during your departure, and this has led to destruction or house soiling, then anything you do may increase your dog's anxiety, making matters worse for future departures and it will not correct what has already been done. Therefore both punishment and excited greetings must be avoided. At homecomings, ignore your dog until she settles down (this may take 10 to 15 minutes). Your dog should soon learn that the faster she settles, the sooner she will get your attention.



What can be done to reduce anxiety at the time of departure?

As you depart, your dog should be kept busy and occupied, and preferably out of your sight, so that there is little or no anxiety. Giving special food treats that have been saved for departures and for the down-stay mat exercises can help keep your dog distracted and perhaps even enjoying herself while you leave. Dogs that are highly aroused and stimulated by food may become so intensively occupied in a peanut butter coated dog toy, a fresh piece of rawhide, a dog toy stuffed with liver and dog food, or some frozen dog treats, that they may not notice you leave. Be certain that the distraction devices last as long as possible so that your dog continues to occupy herself until you are long gone. Frozen treats placed in your dog's food bowl, toys that are tightly stuffed with goodies, toys that are designed to require manipulation and work to obtain the food reward, toys that can maintain lengthy chewing, and timed feeders that open throughout the day are a few suggestions. Determine what best motivates your dog. For example, if a particular toy is highly successful at keeping your dog's attention, provide two or three of the same type, rather than toys that do not maintain your dog's interest. It may also be helpful to provide some or all of your dog's food during departures with a few special surprises in the bottom of the bowl. On rare occasions a second pet can help to keep the dog occupied and distracted during departures. Neither food, nor the second pet is likely to be useful in dogs that are too anxious.

My dog starts to get anxious even before I leave. What can I do?

There are a number of activities that we do consistently prior to each departure. The dog soon learns to identify that these cues or signals mean imminent departure. On the other hand, some dogs learn that other signals indicate that you are not planning to depart (inhibiting cues) and therefore can help the dog to relax. If you can prevent your dog from observing any of these anxiety inducing pre-departure cues, or if you can train your dog that these cues are no longer predictive of departure, then the anxiety is greatly reduced. Even with the best of efforts, some dogs will still pick up on "cues" that the owner is about to depart. Train your dog to associate these cues with enjoyable, relaxing situations rather than the anxiety of impending departure. By exposing your dog to these cues while you remain at home and your dog is relaxed or otherwise occupied, they should no longer predict departure. This entails some retraining while you are home. Get the items (e.g., keys, shoes, briefcase, jacket) that normally signal your departure, and walk to the door. However, do not exit the house. The dog will be watching and possibly get up, but once you put everything away, your dog should lie down. Then, once your dog is calm, this is repeated. Only 3 to 4 repetitions should be done in a day and the dog must be calm and quiet before presenting the cues again. Eventually, your dog will not attend to these cues (habituate) because they are no longer predictive of you leaving. Then, your dog will be less anxious when you do leave.

What can be done to retrain the dog to reduce the dependence and following?

The most important aspect of retraining is to teach your dog to be independent and relaxed in your presence. Only when your dog will stay in his bed or relaxation area, rather than constantly following you around, will you be ready to begin mock or graduated planned departures.

"... teach the dog to be independent and relaxed in your presence."

Attention-getting behaviors must not pay off. Any attempts at attention must be ignored. On the other hand, lying quietly away from you should be rewarded. Teach your dog that it is the quiet behavior that will receive attention, and not following you around, or demanding attention. Teach your dog to relax in his quiet area and to accept lengthy periods of inattention when you are home. You may have to begin with shorter sessions of inattention and gradually shape longer sessions. Training can progress much quicker if your dog learns the down stay and mat exercises on command (see [Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training](#)). Be sure to schedule attention, interaction and play sessions and develop a routine while you are at home, and follow these with gradually longer sessions of inattention (for napping or playing with toys) to try and approximate your times of departure. Your dog should get used to this routine so that you can depart while he is calm.

How can I teach my dog to accept my departures?

Formal retraining should be directed at teaching your dog to remain on his mat, in his bed, or in his crate or den area, for progressively longer periods of time. You may need to begin with food lure exercises, starting with a down-stay and gradually increasing the time and the level of relaxation at each session. Once your dog will stay in your presence, begin to walk away and return, beginning with just a few feet for a few seconds and progressing over time to leaving the room for 30 minutes or longer. Reward with a quiet play or attention session, perhaps coming back and giving a gentle massage or tummy rub. In this way the desired behavior is being shaped and reinforced with the very attention that the dog craves. Remember however, that attention at other times, especially on demand, encourages the dog to follow and pester rather than stay in his bed and relax. A head halter can be particularly useful throughout this training to ensure that your dog remains in position and immediately responds to the command.

From this point on, your dog should be encouraged to stay in his bed or crate for extended periods of time rather than sitting at your feet or on your lap. If your dog can also be taught to sleep in this relaxation area at night rather than on your bed or in your bedroom, this may help to break the over-attachment and dependence more quickly. During these training exercises, use as many cues as possible to help relax the dog. Mimic the secure environment that your dog feels when you are at home. Leave the TV on. Play a favorite video or some music. Leave a favorite blanket or chew toy in the area. All of these cues may help to calm your dog.



How do I progress to leaving the house?

During “mock” or graduated departures, your dog should be exercised, given a short training session, and taken to her bed or mat to relax. Give the “down-stay” command, a few of the novel toys and treats, and then depart while your dog is distracted and relaxed.

The first few mock-departures should be identical to the training exercises above, but instead of leaving the room for a few minutes while your dog is calm and distracted, you will begin to leave the home. The first few departures should be just long enough to leave and return without any signs of anxiety or destructiveness. This might last from a few seconds to a couple of minutes; the hardest part and most critical part may be to merely

get out the door without your dog becoming anxious. Gradually but randomly increase the time. Your dog must always be relaxed when you begin. Departures must be as much like real departures as possible and include other activities associated with departure such as opening and closing the car door and returning, turning on and off the car engine and returning, or pulling the car out of the driveway and returning. The goal is for your dog to learn that departures are short and that you return quickly, so you must only increase the time you are gone if the dog remains relaxed when you leave the house. The increase in time must be random and slowly increased. You cannot suddenly go from a 5-minute departure to a 30-minute one or your dog may become anxious.

How come my dog gets so anxious when I leave home, but is just fine when I leave the car?

Many dogs that destroy the home when left alone will stay in a car or van without becoming anxious or destructive. This may be because your dog has learned to relax and enjoy the car rides without receiving constant physical attention and contact. When you do leave, the departure may be quite short. You may then occasionally leave the dog in the car during longer absences. This provides a degree of proof that your dog can learn to relax if he is used to being ignored, has a location where he feels settled, and gets used to departures gradually. This is similar to the way in which your dog should be trained to relax in your home and accept gradually longer departures.

Is drug therapy useful?

Drug therapy can be useful especially during initial departure training. Tranquilizers alone do not reduce a dog's anxiety and may only be helpful to sedate your dog so that he is less likely to investigate and destroy. Most dogs do best with either fluoxetine or clomipramine over several months, perhaps combined with other antianxiety drugs where necessary.

**"Retraining program that is needed
to help your dog gain some independence
and accept some time away from you."**

Although drugs may be important in reducing underlying anxiety and helping your dog cope, it is the retraining program that is needed to help your dog gain some independence and accept some time away from you. Pheromone therapy can also be useful for diminishing anxiety both while you are home and when you are away. Recently new medications have been approved for the treatment of separation anxiety in dogs. Contact your veterinarian to discuss if medication is appropriate for your pet.

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