

# Separation Anxiety in Dogs

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## How do I know if my pet'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destruction and elimination, they may be restless, shake, shiver, salivate, refuse to eat, or become quiet and withdrawn. While typically the behavior occurs every time the owner leaves, in some cases it may only happen on selected departures, such as work-day 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, i.e. storms, fireworks etc. 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, vocalize 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 housetrained 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.

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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. 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. Until you can get your pet to settle and relax while you are at home, your pet is unlikely to settle when you leave.

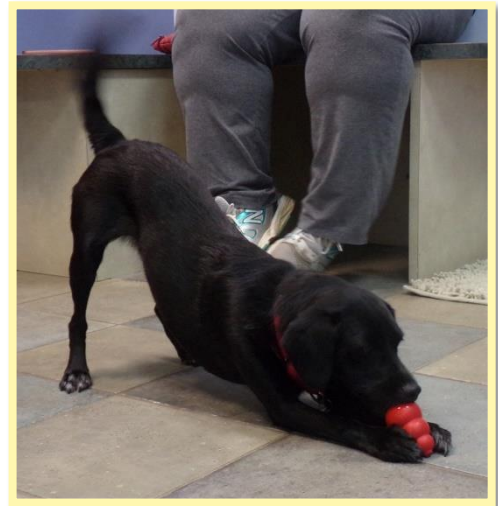
The steps you need to follow are:

### 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 it can expect attention (including exercise, feeding, training, play and elimination) and when it 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 pet, make sure that you are meeting all of its 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 pet is prepared to settle down and relax. At this point, new exploratory and chew toys can be given so that the pet 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 pet's favored rewards are the attention and play that you provide. Treats, food, play and chew toys may also be highly desirable to the pet. Take each of the pet's most valuable rewards and ask yourself: "what behavior does my pet need to learn" and "what behavior should I never reinforce". With separation anxiety you must reinforce the pet for settling down, relaxing and showing some independence, while attention seeking and following behaviors should never be reinforced. Therefore, training

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should focus on extended and relaxed down stays and going to a bed or mat on command. If your dog seeks attention, you should either ignore your dog entirely until it settles, or have your dog do a down-stay or go to its 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

The goal of training is that your dog learns to settle comfortably on cue. Focus on having your pet in a settled down, or lying on its 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 its toys or even sleep, can provide a secure area where your pet might settle when you are not home. You can begin by training your pet 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 pets' 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 its training routine using a toy or treat as a lure or a leash and head halter. In time, a daily routine should be established where the dog learns to lie on its mat after each exercise, play and training session to either nap or play with its 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 its rewards (treats, toys, chews, affection, feeding toys) only in this area. Audible cues such as a radio, CD 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).

### **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 pet's level of anxiety by training it to feel comfortable in your absence. This can be a long process.

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 the dog to work, find a friend to care for the dog for the day, board the dog for the day, or arrange to take some time off from work to retrain the dog. 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

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injuries. It is important to choose a room or area that does not further increase the dog's anxiety. The 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, but the 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 the dog 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, the pet must learn to accept progressively longer periods of inattention and separation while the owners are at home.

### **What should be done prior to departures?**



Before any lengthy departure, provide a vigorous session of play and exercise. This not only helps to reduce some of the dog's energy and tire it 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 15-30 minutes prior to departure, the dog should be ignored. It would be best if your dog were taken to its rest and relaxation area with a radio, TV, or video playing, (as above). The owner could then prepare for departure while the pet is out of sight and earshot of the owner. At this point, the pet can be provided with some new motivating toys to keep it occupied and distracted

before and during your departure. The key is to avoid as many of the departure cues as possible, so that the dog's anxiety doesn't heighten before the owner leaves. Brushing teeth, changing into work clothes, or collecting keys, purse, briefcase or schoolbooks, are all routines that might be able to be performed out of sight of the dog. Owners might also consider changing clothes at work, preparing and packing a lunch the night before, or even leaving their car at a neighbor's so the 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. 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).

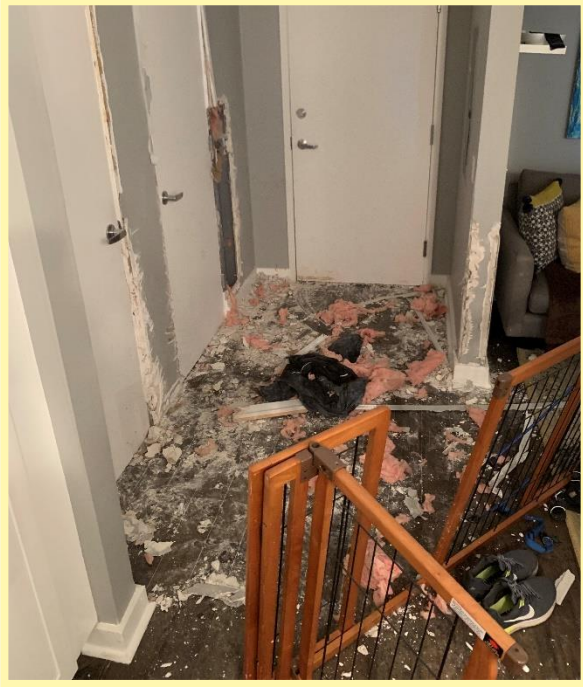
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### **What should I do if I come home to a mess?**

If your dog has been anxious during your departure, and this has led to destruction or housesoiling, then anything you do may increase your pet'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 it settles down (this may take 10-15 minutes). Your dog should soon learn that the faster it settles, the sooner it 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 the dog distracted and perhaps "enjoying itself" 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 the dog continues to occupy itself until you are "long gone". Frozen treats placed in the 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 the 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 and react. Train your pet to associate these cues with enjoyable, relaxing situations (rather than the anxiety of impending departure). By

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exposing the dog to these cues while you remain at home and when the dog is relaxed or otherwise occupied, they should no longer predict departure. This entails some retraining while you are home. Get the items (keys, shoes, briefcase, jacket etc.) that normally signal your departure, and walk to the door. However, do not leave or exit the house. The dog will be watching and possibly get up, but once you put every thing away, the dog should lie down. Then, once the dog is calm, this is repeated. Only 3-4 repetitions should be done in a day and the dog must be calm and quiet before presenting the cues again. Eventually, the dog will not attend to these cues (habituate) because they are no longer predictive of you leaving and will not react, get up or look anxious as you go about your pre-departure tasks. Then, the 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 the dog to be independent and relaxed in your presence. Only when your dog will stay in its bed or relaxation area, rather than constantly following you around, will you be ready to begin mock or graduated planned departures.

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 its 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. 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 the dog is calm.

### **How can I teach my dog to accept my departures?**

Formal retraining should be directed at teaching your dog to remain on its mat, in its bed, or in its 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 the pet 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 its bed and relax. A head halter can be particularly useful throughout this training to ensure that the pet remains in position and immediately responds to the command.

From this point on, your dog should be encouraged to stay in its 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

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as possible to help relax the dog. Mimic the secure environment that the dog feels when the owner is at home. Leave the TV on. Play a favorite video or CD. Leave a favorite blanket or chew toy in the area. All of these cues may help to calm the dog.

### How do I progress to leaving the house?



During "mock" or graduated departures, the dog should be exercised, given a short training session, and taken to its bed or mat to relax. Give the 'down-stay' command, a few of the novel toys and treats and then depart while the 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 the 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; however, the hardest part and most critical part may be to merely get out the door without the dog becoming anxious. Gradually but randomly increase the time. The 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 the dog to learn that departures are short and that you return quickly therefore you must only increase the time you

are gone if the dog remains relaxed when you leave the house. However, 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 the dog may become anxious.

### Is drug therapy useful?

Drug therapy can be useful especially during initial departure training. Tranquilizers alone do not reduce the pet's anxiety and may only be helpful to sedate your dog so that it is less likely to investigate and destroy. Often the most suitable drugs for long-term use are antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs or a combination of the two. Drugs alone will do little or nothing to improve separation anxiety. 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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