



Separation Anxiety

Understanding Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety refers to the fear of being left alone. Dogs who struggle with separation anxiety often show signs of distress both when their attachment figure prepares to leave as well as after they are gone. Separation anxiety can range in severity and presents itself in a variety of ways. Some signs of separation anxiety are:

- Shaking or trembling
- Pacing
- Drooling
- Whining
- Barking
- Destructive chewing when left alone
- Urinating or defecating in the house when the dog is otherwise housetrained
- Chewing or biting at bars of kennels or enclosures (sometimes to the point of breaking teeth)
- Escape attempts
- Inability to eat when left alone
- Any of the following signs when guardian prepares to leave

Remember that these behaviors, such as destructive chewing or eliminating in the house are signs of a more serious underlying issue and are not happening out of spite or anger. If you do get home and discover that any items have been destroyed or the dog has eliminated in the house, avoid punishment as the dog is likely to associate the punishment with you arriving home rather than the behaviors they displayed due to high levels of anxiety while you were gone. Instead, consider adjusting your plan and putting additional management in place in order to decrease the likelihood of seeing these behaviors while you continue your behavior modification plan.

Working With Separation Anxiety

Prevention:

- Always leave your dog with items they can chew and enjoy while you are gone. This helps keep their brains and bodies busy as well as creates a positive association to you being gone.
- Crate train your dog so they see confinement areas as a safe place to be.
- Give your dog short breaks away from you by putting them in a crate or another room with a high value item sporadically throughout the week.
- Ensure their physical needs are met before you leave them alone.
- Provide daily mental exercise. Short positive reinforcement training sessions or meals out of puzzle toys help to meet dog's mental needs and keep them psychologically healthy and happy.

Treatment:

Our goal when working with animals with separation anxiety is to decrease their fear of being left alone. We primarily do this through counterconditioning and heavy management during the training process. Setting up a camera so that you can watch your dog's behavior when they are left alone is a great way to monitor stress levels and progress as you train. Patience and consistency go a long way when treating separation anxiety and some or all of the following can help work on this issue:

- **Reduce overall stress-** Avoid things that cause an increase in stress or anxiety in their day-to-day lives.
- **Provide ample enrichment-** Make sure to provide a large variety of enrichment items each time you leave. Enrichment will not only give your dog something to do while you're gone but is also the primary way to build a positive association with being separated from you. Some options might be:
 - Store-bought items:
 - Kong Wobbler
 - Starmark Bob-a-lot
 - Kong Gyro
 - Homemade enrichment ideas:
 - Fill a muffin tin with kibble. Put tennis balls to cover the food for added difficulty
 - Drill holes in the side of a PVC pipe, fill with kibble, and put a cap on both ends.
 - Make a foraging box by stuffing a cardboard box, paper towel or toilet paper roll with newspaper and treats hidden inside.
 - Stuff a Kong with high value food, such as peanut butter, cream cheese or wet food. To increase difficulty, freeze ahead of time for a long-lasting, high value treat.
- **Slowly work on desensitization** - Start with very short departures and slowly increase the amount of time that your dog spends alone. Try to only leave your dog alone for as long as they can tolerate without displaying signs of stress. This helps to ensure that they have only positive experiences when being left alone.
- **Desensitize to departure cues-** If your dog displays anxiety when you prepare to leave, you can desensitize them to these triggers by disconnecting the trigger from your departure. Some examples of this would be:
 - Putting your coat and shoes on then sitting down to watch TV
 - Picking up your car keys then going into the kitchen to make breakfast
 - Putting on your work clothes and then sitting at the kitchen table to have a snack on a day that you do not have to go to work.
- **Use indicator cues-** Give the dog a cue that indicates what the duration of the departure will be. This is a great way to increase predictability and tends to decrease stress. For longer departures, use one cue (such as "Be a good dog") and for shorter departures use an entirely different cue (such as "I'll be right back"). Give the cue right before you leave the house. The words you choose do not matter as long as you're consistent.
- **Utilize alternative options-** Get some help for times that you do need to be gone longer than the animal can tolerate. Some solutions would be finding a friend or family to sit with the dog, hiring a dog sitter or sending your dog to daycare if they enjoy the company of other dogs.

- **Stress reducing pheromones**- Pheromone diffusers or sprays, such as Adaptil or Comfort Zone can help decrease stress and ease anxiety for dogs.
- **Go slow**- Remember that this is a process and going at your dog's pace is the biggest key to success.
- **Talk to your vet**- In many cases dogs that struggle with separation anxiety benefit from pharmaceutical intervention. Talk to your vet about if there are any potential medications or supplements that might be appropriate for your dog.

When and How to Get Additional Help

When searching for trainers, it is critical that you find a trainer who is certified through a third-party organization that requires: trainers prove they have a certain level of knowledge about things like body language, behavior, learning theory, and training; are held to a certain code of ethics; and are required to receive ongoing continuing education. Two trusted organizations where you can search a database to find certified trainers near you are the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers or the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants.

If your dog is displaying more severe behaviors such as: barking for long periods of time; destruction of household items, especially damage to the house around exit points such as door or windows; has caused damage or injury to themselves; displays constant or severe distress that is not relieved by the suggestions above; or the level of anxiety they are experiencing is interfering with their quality of life, you should consult with a Board-Certified Veterinary Behaviorist so they can evaluate your situation and get you a plan that is appropriate for you and your pet.