

Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is a problem many pet parents face. Some dogs are just bored when left alone and find their own ways to amuse themselves. Other dogs are genuinely upset when left alone.

Tips to Reduce Boredom

- Increase physical activity (more walks, fetch) and Mental activity (training games)
- Schedule a dog walker to walk the dog in the middle of the day
- Enroll your dog in doggy day care a few days a week

Separation Anxiety Signs & Treatment

- Trembling, whining, pacing, excessive panting, or drooling, both as you prepare to leave and while you are away
- Excessive drooling
- Loss of appetite, both as you prepare to leave and while you are away
- Continuous barking or whining while you are gone
- Repeated accidents in the house
- Chewing or digging at potential exits or self-injury

Pre-Departure Cues

Dogs are such careful observers of human behavior that they are quick to learn all the things humans do before they leave. These routine tasks can include, turning off the TV as well as picking up car keys or putting on your shoes.

Dogs with separation anxiety learn that these activities often mean that you will be leaving, and become stressed in anticipation. That means your dog may be tense before you even get near the door.

1. First, we need to start to desensitizing your dog's emotional response to these cues. Make a list of things that seem to make him anxious when you are preparing to leave.
2. To change your dog's way of thinking about these things, start to randomly pick up your keys, take on and off your shoes, etc. This is changing the association of these actions for your dog. At first, you should only do this when you are staying home—not when you are planning on leaving.

Departures

The next step will be to “practice” departures. Here is a sample sequence:

- Take a step toward the door, then step back (sit back down, walk around the house)
- Take two steps toward the door, put your hand on the knob, and step back.
- Turn the doorknob and crack the door slightly, close it and step back.
- Open the door and walk through. Step back in.
- Walk through the door and close it behind you, wait a few seconds, return. (Increase time slowly)

Leapfrog between harder and easier repeats, to give your dog "easy" repeats part of the time. Remember to do this throughout the separation anxiety training. Periodically throw in an easy repetition to keep your dog in the game, rather than always making things progressively harder.

- Does your dog have a favorite treat? Give them a yummy treat, a Kong, or a food dispensing toy to help keep their mind off of you leaving. Some dogs are easy to redirect this way.

Tips

- Keep arrivals and departures low key. During training to alleviate separation anxiety, the goal is for the dog to remain as calm as possible at all times. Making a big deal out of departures and arrivals undermines that goal. Fawning over the dog as you leave home conveys the message that departures are a big deal. The same is true of grand celebrations when you return home.
- It may be hard for most owners, but it is helpful to ignore dogs with separation anxiety for between 10 and 30 minutes before departures and after arrivals. The longer you keep the focus off the dog the better. This routine helps teach the dog that it's not a big deal when someone leaves or arrives.
- Some dogs with mild separation anxiety can be treated effectively over a long weekend. Others may take weeks or months to begin to feel safe when you leave. Regardless of where your dog falls on this scale, one of the elements that may contribute to the dog's stress is your stress. For his sake as well as your own, it's best to relax and be patient about this process.
- Make sure that your dog is getting adequate physical and mental exercise. This is important and can reduce anxiety drastically.

Crate Training

Crate training your dog can be useful for mild separation anxiety. A dog with severe anxiety over you leaving the house may feel trapped in a crate and can hurt themselves trying to get out. If your dog is urinating or being destructive in the home when you are gone, crating may be the way to go. This will keep your dog out of trouble and safe. It is important to properly crate train your dog before leaving them for long periods in the crate. (see Crate Training handout)