

SEPARATION ANXIETY

WHAT IS SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Like humans, dogs are highly social animals. Their ancestors lived in small groups and depended on each other for companionship and survival, so it makes sense that our pet dogs naturally crave our frequent company and attention. Since dogs aren't genetically prepared for solitude, it also makes sense that when left alone, they often experience anxiety.

Some dogs become *extremely* nervous and upset when left alone. Unlike the vast majority of dogs, who may feel slightly anxious, lonely and bored when isolated, these dogs seem downright terrified when their owners leave them by themselves. This behavior problem, called *separation anxiety*, can produce severe emotional distress, resulting in a number of unpleasant symptoms. The good news is that, although separation anxiety can be hard on both dogs and their people, you *can* prevent and treat it.

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY DOG HAS IT?

Sometimes it can be a bit difficult to figure out whether or not a dog suffers from actual separation anxiety, as opposed to garden-variety stress when left alone. A bona fide case of separation anxiety is probably best described as the canine equivalent of a panic attack. Common symptoms include:

- pacing, panting, shaking, hiding or exhibiting other signs of stress while the owner prepares to leave home
- dilated pupils
- sweaty pads
- excessive vocalization (whining, barking, howling), which is usually most intense right after the owner leaves but can continue for long periods of time
- scratching, digging or chewing at entry and exit points, like doors and windows
- excessive drooling
- refusal to eat in the absence of owner
- urinating or defecating indoors (usually only or primarily in the owner's absence)
- frantic attempts to escape from confinement (crates, for example) which, in serious cases, can result in injury to the dog
- frenzied greetings upon owner's return

Dogs who have separation anxiety usually exhibit a number of these symptoms, rather than just one or two of them.

Separation anxiety is over-diagnosed these days. Virtually ALL dogs deal with some level of stress when their humans leave them home alone. Many owners assume that their dogs have separation anxiety when their pets actually have different, less serious problems. If your dog demolishes your sofa, gnaws the table legs off your dining room table, barks when you're gone and/or eliminates in the house, you're probably just dealing with boredom, mild stress and incomplete housetraining. Those issues should be ruled out before jumping to the conclusion that your dog is experiencing true separation anxiety.

WHY DOES SEPARATION ANXIETY HAPPEN?

Although we don't know exactly what causes separation anxiety, behavior experts have found that its development is often preceded by sudden alterations of routine or lifestyle. Dogs can be very sensitive to change. Events that may trigger separation anxiety include:

- relocation (for example, a dog and her family move into a new home)
- re-homing (a family gives their dog to someone else or a dog gets adopted from a shelter)
- a drastic change in schedule or daily routine—especially if it involves an increase in alone-time for a dog (an owner works at home, always in the company of his dog, and then gets another job that requires leaving the dog alone all day)
- the death or relocation of a family member (a teenager who previously interacted often with his dog goes away to college)
- a traumatic event that happens when a dog's alone (loud, scary noises or other fear-inducing experiences)

Shelter dogs, who must endure a great deal of isolation and stress in a kennel environment, seem particularly susceptible to developing separation anxiety. When a shelter dog gets adopted, she's faced with adjusting to a totally new life. There's an enormous contrast between life in a noisy, lonely kennel and life in a home, with a brand new family. Initially, that big change can cause a lot of stress. So if you've just adopted a new dog, read on to learn about how to prevent separation anxiety from happening in the first place, which is much easier than treating it.

HOW CAN I PREVENT THE PROBLEM?

There are a number of things you can do to help your dog adjust to her new life with you. If you follow the tips below, you can make your new dog's transition from shelter to home easier—and you'll probably avoid the development of separation anxiety:

- **Always leave your dog home alone with something to do or chew** (food puzzle toys, like Kongs, are great). You can even choose a special treat or chew that your dog only gets when you leave her alone to enjoy it.
- **Avoid showering attention on your dog when you first bring her home.** If you spend 24/7 with your new dog over a weekend, for example, and then must leave her alone for 8 hours when you go to work on Monday, that will probably cause stress and may trigger separation anxiety. Instead, be sure to leave her by herself for short periods (which can be only a few minutes or a couple of hours) from the beginning. It'll be hard, because you'll be enamored with your new furry family member, but it's in her best interest to get her used to time alone early in your relationship.
- **Avoid making a fuss over departures and arrivals.** You want your absence to be no big deal. You DON'T want to create a huge contrast between "The Horrible, Sad Time Alone" and "The Joyful Time When You're Around." So don't engage in prolonged goodbyes right before leaving your dog home by herself, and don't throw a party when you come back. Instead, leave without ceremony and behave calmly when you return. If your dog already seems mildly anxious when you're away, wait 5 to 10 minutes before greeting her when you get home.
- **Provide A TON of exercise.** If your dog is happily pooped when you leave her by herself, instead of hyped-up on unexpended energy, she's much less likely to experience anxiety.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY DOG IF SHE ALREADY HAS SEPARATION ANXIETY?

If you determine that your dog DOES have true separation anxiety, you'll need to both manage and address the problem, which will require patience and time. Treating separation anxiety can be difficult, but the prognosis is usually very good. If you put the effort into helping your dog overcome her separation anxiety, you'll almost certainly succeed, and you'll both be much happier.

Management

Managing your dog's behavior if she has separation anxiety can be tricky. In order to help your dog overcome this problem, you'll need to make sure that, for the duration of your training program, she's never left alone. That may mean taking her to doggie daycare while you're at work, dropping her off with friends and family when you can't be with her or planning to stay at home yourself, if that's possible.

Training

In some cases, the problem's not too serious and can be resolved in a matter of weeks. Very severe cases may require one or more months of training. Addressing separation anxiety involves developing a desensitization program, which focuses on getting your dog used to being alone very, very gradually. You'll start by identifying exactly when your dog starts to get anxious. Is it when you put on your shoes and coat? Is it when you pick up your keys and backpack? Is it when you get into the shower before going to work? After you figure out which parts of your departure ritual triggers your dog's anxiety, you'll perform those activities . . . and then NOT leave. With repetition and time, your dog's anxiety will go away during your getting-ready-to-leave behaviors, because they won't predict your departure anymore. Then you can move on to leaving your dog alone for a very, very short time (usually only a few seconds). As your dog gets used to very brief absences, you'll slowly increase her time alone.

Medication

Some medications can help speed along your training program and decrease your dog's stress level. If you're working with a professional dog trainer, ask him or her to discuss possible medication options with you and your dog's vet.

RESOURCES & RECOMMENDED READING

For detailed information about separation anxiety, we highly recommend reading Patricia McConnell's *I'll Be Home Soon*, which you can find it in our Lora Robins Gift Shop. You can also call our **Behavior Helpline at 804-643-SPCA** for advice, to arrange a private consult at the Richmond SPCA or to get a referral to a local behavior expert who can provide in-home, intensive counseling.