Separation Anxiety

Dogs with separation anxiety exhibit behavior problems when they're left alone. Typically, they'll have a dramatic anxiety response within a short time (20-45 minutes) after their owners leave them. The most common of these behaviors are:

- Digging, chewing, and scratching at door or windows in an attempt to escape and reunite with their owners
- Howling, barking, and crying in an attempt to get their owners to return
- Urination and defecation (even with housetrained dogs) as a result of distress

Why Do Dogs Suffer From Separation Anxiety?
We don't fully understand exactly why some dogs suffer from separation anxiety and under similar circumstances, others don't. It's important to realize, however, that the destruction and house soiling that often occur with separation anxiety are not the dog's attempt to punish or seek revenge on his owner for leaving him alone, but are actually part of a panic response.

Separation anxiety sometimes occurs when:

- A dog has never or rarely been left alone.
- Following a long interval, such as vacation, during which the owner and dog are constantly together.
- After a traumatic event (from the dog's point of view) such as a period of time spent at a shelter or boarding kennel.
- After a change in the family's routine or structure (a child leaving for college, a change in work schedule, a move to a new home, a new pet or person in the home).

How Do I Know If My Dog Has Separation Anxiety?
Because there are many reasons for the behaviors associated with separation anxiety, it's essential to correctly diagnose the reason for the behavior before proceeding with treatment. If most, or all, of the following statements are true about your dog, he **may** have a separation anxiety problem:

- The behavior ***always*** occurs when he's left alone, no matter how long.
- He follows you from room to room whenever you're home.
- He displays effusive, frantic greeting behaviors.
- He reacts with excitement, depression, or anxiety to your preparations to leave the house.
- He dislikes spending time outdoors by himself.

What to Do If Your Dog Has Separation Anxiety
For a minor separation anxiety problem, the following techniques may be helpful by themselves. For more severe problems, these techniques should be used along with the desensitization process described in the next section. It is also recommended to seek professional help for more severe problem.

- Keep arrivals and departures at low-key. For example, when you arrive home, ignore your dog for the first few minutes, and then calmly pet him.
- Leave your dog with an article of clothing that smells like you, an old tee shirt that you've slept in recently, for example.
- Establish a "safety cue" – a word or action that you use ***every*** time you leave that tells your dog you'll be back. Dogs usually learn to associate certain cues with short absences by their owners. For example, when you take out the garbage, your dog knows you come right back and doesn't

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become anxious. Therefore, it's helpful to associate a safety cue with your practice departures and short-duration absences. Some examples of safety cues are: a playing radio; a playing television; a bone; or a toy (one that doesn't have dangerous fillings and can't be torn into pieces). Use your safety cue during practice sessions, but don't present your dog with the safety cue when you leave for a period of time longer than he can tolerate or the value of the safety cue will be lost. Leaving a radio on to provide company for your dog isn't particularly useful by itself, but a playing radio may work if you've used it consistently as a safety cue in your practice sessions. If your dog engages in destructive chewing as a part of his separation distress, offering him a chewing item as a safety cue is a good idea. Very hard rubber toys that can be stuffed with treats, Nylabone-like products and natural chew bones are good choices.

Desensitization Techniques for More Severe Cases of Separation Anxiety

The primary treatment for more severe cases of separation anxiety is a systematic process of getting your dog use to being alone. You must teach your dog to remain calm during "practice" departures and short absences. We recommend the following procedure:

- Begin by engaging in your normal departure activities (getting your keys, putting on your coat), then sit back down. Repeat this step until your dog shows no distress in response to your activities.
- Next, engage in your normal departure activities and go to the door and open it, then sit back down.
- Next, step outside the door, leaving the door open, and then return.
- Finally, step outside, close the door, and then immediately return. Slowly get your dog accustomed to being along with the door closed between you for several seconds.
- Proceed very gradually from step to step, repeating each step until your dog shows no signs of distress (the number of repetitions will vary depending on the severity of the problem). If at any time in this process your actions produce an anxiety response in your dog, you've proceeded too fast. Return to the earlier step in the process and practice this step until the dog shows no distress response, then proceed to the next step.
- When your dog is tolerating your being on the other side of the door for several seconds, begin short-duration absences. This step involves giving the dog a verbal cue (for example, "I'll be back"), leaving and then returning within a minute. Your return must be low-key: either ignore your dog or greet him quietly and calmly. If he shows no signs of distress, repeat the exercise. If he appears anxious, wait until he relaxes to repeat the exercise. Gradually increase the length of time you're gone.
- Practice as many absences as possible that last less than ten minutes. You can do many departures within one session if your dog relaxes sufficiently between departures. You should also scatter practice departures and short-duration absences throughout the day.
- Once your dog can handle short absences (30 to 90 minutes), he'll usually be able to handle longer intervals alone and you won't have to work up to all-day absences minute by minute. The hard part is at the beginning, but the job gets easier as you go along. Nevertheless, you must go slowly at first. How long it takes to condition your dog to being alone depends on the severity of his problem.

Teaching the Sit-Stay and Down-Stay

Practice sit-stay or down-stay exercises using positive reinforcement. Never punish your dog during these training sessions. Gradually increase the distance you move away from your dog. Your goal is to be able to move briefly out of your dog's sight while he remains in the "stay" position. The point is to

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teach him that he can remain calmly and happily in one place while you go to another. As you progress, you can do this during the course of your normal daily activities. For example, if you're watching television with your dog by your side and you get up for a snack; tell him to stay, and leave the room. When you come back, give him a treat and quietly praise him.

Interim Solutions

Because the above-described treatments can take a while, and because a dog with separation anxiety can do serious damage to himself and/or your home in the interim, some of the following suggestions may be helpful in dealing with the problems in the short term:

- Consult your veterinarian about the possibility of drug therapy. A good anti-anxiety drug should not sedate your dog, but simply reduce his anxiety while you're gone. Such medication is a temporary measure and should be used in conjunction with behavior modification techniques.
- Take your dog to a dog day care facility or boarding kennel.
- Leave your dog with a friend, family member, or neighbor.
- Take your dog to work with you, even for a half a day, if possible.

What Won't Help a Separation Anxiety Problem

- Punishment is not an effective way to treat separation anxiety. In fact, if you punish your dog after you return home it may actually increase his separation anxiety.
- Crating your dog. Your dog will still engage in anxiety responses in the crate. He may urinate, defecate, howl or even injure himself in an attempt to escape from the crate.
- Leave the radio on (unless the radio is used as a "safety cue" – see above).
- Obedience school. While obedience training is always a good idea, it won't directly help a separation anxiety problem. Separation anxiety is not the result of disobedience or lack of training, it's a panic response.

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