

Separation Anxiety

Brenda G. Mills, DVM

Dogs with separation anxiety are literally afraid when they are separated from their human pack. In some cases, the anxiety is shown when a single person is absent, regardless of who else may be present. In other cases, the dog is only frantic when left completely alone. There are dogs whose behavior falls somewhere in between. When “abandoned” by their pack, dogs with separation anxiety may lie down and appear comatose all day, or they may engage in any of a number of destructive or disruptive behaviors that do not normally occur while the family is home. These dogs are usually “Velcro” dogs, seemingly compelled to follow their favorite person around the house all day. They are also often active, intelligent dogs.

To understand separation anxiety, you first have to understand some fundamental aspects of social life that are hard-wired into the dog. The vast majority of the domestic dogs’ wild cousins live in groups of two or more, called “packs”. These animals rely on their packmates in order to survive. Without their packmates and without leadership, they would die. Most domestic dog breeds have been selectively bred to accept humans as their packmates and leaders, to seek out and enjoy human companionship, and even to work with humans as teammates. Some of our pet dogs take this to an extreme, and honestly come to believe, for whatever reason, that when their person or people leave them, they are being abandoned to die. Dogs with separation anxiety do not misbehave “out of spite”, because they’re “mad” at us, or to “get back” at us. They misbehave because they are afraid, and they are so frantic that they cannot even think.

Dogs who have been adopted from an animal shelter or who have been through multiple homes seem to be the most likely to develop separation anxiety, probably because they have already been “abandoned” one or more times. Dogs may show separation anxiety at any age. Sometimes there is an event that seems to initiate the problem, such as the children going back to school after summer vacation, an owner returning to work after a long illness or a long stretch of being at home for any reason, or perhaps a frightening event that occurred while the owner was away one day. Some older dogs get separation anxiety as a result of becoming more dependent on their owners because of blindness, deafness, or other disability.

Regardless of the dog’s age or the reason for separation anxiety, the treatment protocol is essentially the same. Your veterinarian may or may not recommend medication in association with the behavior modification (training) plan. Clomicalm is the most commonly recommended medication for separation anxiety. This drug is a tricyclic antidepressant which serves to increase the dog’s receptiveness to the behavior modification protocol – it does not decrease separation anxiety by itself. Like any endeavor involving training, dealing with separation anxiety takes time and patience. You will not likely see results overnight, or even in the first month.

Steps to Modify the Behavior of Dogs with Separation Anxiety:

- 1) **Increase your dog's exercise.** Whatever you are already doing with your dog, double it. That means if you are already going for one walk every day, make it two, at least 30 minutes each. If you are already playing fetch once a day, make it twice. If you're not taking your dog to a dog park every day and your dog is not dog aggressive, start taking him. If you're not walking your dog at all, it's probably because he gets "so excited" and is "difficult to handle." If this is the case, consider enrolling in an obedience class. It is very difficult to give a dog adequate mental and physical exercise without leaving the back yard – in fact, I believe it to be impossible. If you are not walking your dog because of control issues, please ask out staff about training aids which may help you. We may recommend moving to a pinch collar or a halter to give you more control.
- 2) **Desensitize your dog to cues that you are leaving.** This means walking around the house and sitting in front of the TV with your keys in your hand, rattling them. This means reading in bed with your hat or coat on. This means carrying your purse or wallet into the bathroom or out into the backyard. Be creative!
- 3) **Desensitize your dog to your actual departure.** Get up in the middle of doing something and just leave for a few seconds – no departure cues, just get up and go out the door, far enough that your dog cannot see you out the window. Start with a one-second departure – just close the door behind you, then come back in. Work your way up to being able to be gone for 30 minutes, a little at a time. If your dog begins to show anxiety, go back to the last departure time that did not cause anxiety, and work your way up more slowly. It may take 2 months or more to get up to being able to leave the house for 30 minutes without your dog flipping out on you.
- 4) **Give your dog a special, long-lasting food treat before you leave for any period of time.** You may do this while doing the desensitization exercise – just make sure you take the treat away when you come back inside. This convinces the dog that the treat is only his while you are gone, and that when he has the treat you are coming back. I like to use stuffed Kong toys.
- 5) **Hide long-lasting food treats in the house or yard for your dog to find while you are away.** Hide them only when you are preparing to leave for several hours. This gives you dog something yummy and non-disruptive to do while you are gone, and gives him something to look forward to when you leave.
- 6) **Train your dog to stay put, away from you, while you are home.** I call this the "Place Exercise". I use the command "Go to your place" and signal one of my dog's mats or beds with a hand gesture, and he is supposed to stay there until released. Start with a mat or bed right next to your couch. Give your command, gently lead your dog to his place, and give him a treat. Then release him. Once your dog is going to the mat on command and waiting for the treat, use the treat to

lure him into a down, and treat only when he is down. Then start giving the treat after he has been down for 5 seconds, 10 seconds, etc. Once you are up to one minute, begin putting him in his place and sitting next to him on the couch. Using gentle reminders and intermittent rewards (patting, food treats), work up to your dog being able to stay on the mat for 30 minutes at a time. It is often helpful to be able to tether your dog in the area of the mat, so that your dog has no choice but to remain in the area of the mat after your command. If you must correct him, do so by gently saying “No” followed by your command and guide his body back into a down gently with your hands. Once he will stay in his place for 30 minutes with only 2 or 3 rewards during the interval, begin moving away from your dog a few inches at a time. Praise him when he stays down, gently correct him when he gets up, and go to him occasionally to reward with treats and petting. The eventual goal is for you to be able to get up and move around the room and even go to the kitchen or bathroom with your dog remaining in his place, calmly.

- 7) **Control attention.** From this day forward, your dog gets attention when you want him to, not whenever he demands it. If your dog puts his head in your lap, do not pet him – ask for a sit or a down, and pet him when he complies. If your dog jumps up on you, ignore him – do not even make eye contact with him. Pet him only when he is standing, sitting, or lying down quietly. Walk over to him while he is doing absolutely nothing, or while he is quietly chewing his toy, and pet him and praise him. Reward only the behaviors you like – anything that is calm, quiet, and not following you. If he drops his ball in you lap, ask for a down stay first, then reward the down stay by playing. You may allow your dog into your lap or to put his feet up on you, but only when you ask him to.
- 8) **Ignore your dog before you leave the house and when you come home.** Most behaviorists recommend ignoring your dog for 30 minutes before departure and on arrival. Why? Because our dogs key in on the cues that we are leaving, and get all wound up asking us to stay with them. This increases the level of anxiety after you leaving by setting the dog up for a huge letdown. When you come home, ignore your dog, not even making eye contact, until he is calm and quiet. If he knows that a calm greeting is expected and that a raucous party is not about to ensue following your arrival, he will work himself up less before your arrival.
- 9) **Establish a schedule, and try not to vary from it.** Allow your dog to anticipate when his walks will occur, when he is going to the dog park, when he can expect to play fetch, when he can expect to get up in the morning and when meals will occur. Being able to predict the order of his world will help decrease your dog’s anxiety. Most of the obnoxious behaviors associated with separation anxiety occur in the first 30 minutes after you leave and the 30 minutes before you get home. Keeping you arrival and departure times as consistent as possible takes out a lot of guesswork on the dog’s part. Bear in mind that if you regularly come home at 6:00 pm, your dog begins to anticipate your return as early as 5:30. If you don’t return until 7:00 pm, your dog has been waiting and worrying and wishing

he could dial 911 since 6:01, so you may come home to find evidence of a “relapse” on your dog’s part.

- 10) **Do not punish the anxiety-related behaviors.** Punishment will only increase the dog’s anxiety. You may succeed in eliminating one anxiety-related behavior, but if you do, it will almost certainly be replaced by another behavior which may be even worse.
- 11) **Do not attempt to modify your dog’s behavior by confinement, unless there is a specific area you are trying to keep him out of.** Crating a dog with separation anxiety may spare the carpet or the doorjamb, but may lead to your dog damaging himself trying to escape from the crate or by chewing or licking himself until there are wounds.
- 12) **Teach your dog something.** Get his mind active. You may need to start with basics, like what is an appropriate chew toy and how to walk on a leash, how to sit and how to down. Go on to teach some tricks, or some advanced obedience exercises, or do some backyard agility. You can even train basic tracking skills in your own home! Better still, get involved in agility for real, or tracking, or herding. You don’t necessarily ever have to compete – just find classes and go so you and your dog can learn together! Learn about TTouch and clicker training, and make life more interesting for both of you.
- 13) **Do not attempt to alleviate your dog’s anxiety by getting another dog.** A second dog rarely improves the situation, and may actually make matters worse by causing the dog with separation anxiety to have to compete with another dog for your attention.

Any variation from the routine established to alleviate your dogs anxiety or any change in the composition of the household may cause a setback. This means that changing your work schedule, having someone move in to the household for the summer, or going to Tahiti for a week without your dog may cause a relapse. Taking your dog with you to another house, travelling with your dog, etc. may also cause your dog to exhibit his anxiety-related behaviors again. You may find that you need to train your dog to wait in the car for you or to remain tethered while you leave his side momentarily at a park even though his behavior has improved at home.

Remember that dogs do not generalize lessons well, and the fact that your dog knows you will always come home does not mean that he knows you will always come back to the car, or back to where he is tied. To teach your dog to wait for you calmly anywhere outside the home, use the same type of gradual step process you used to teach the place command and to teach your dog not to panic every time you go out the door.