

SEPARATION ANXIETY BASICS

Separation anxiety (SA) ranges from mild to severe. Approximately 14% of all dogs suffer from separation anxiety. It occurs in all breeds, as well as mixed-breed dogs. More than 80% of dogs with the disorder showed other anxiety-related behaviors, which suggests it may be part of a general anxiety disorder.* Separation anxiety includes a combination of the following behaviors:

MILD/MODERATE

- Excessive barking/whining/howling
- Housesoiling
- Destruction of objects
- Unable to settle/sleep
- Escape from enclosures

SEVERE

- Self-injury
- Not eating when alone
- Hypersalivation (excessive drooling)
- Destruction at exit points

A dog with separation anxiety is panicking, not misbehaving. If your dog shows any of these behaviors, they are not being bad. They are in distress. Punishment will only make things worse. The ways in which we address separation anxiety depends on the severity of the behavior. These guidelines can help you get started.

FIRST STEP: RULE OUT OTHER CAUSES

There can be other reasons your dog is having accidents or shredding pillows when you're gone.

HEALTH-RELATED CAUSES

Dogs of any age can develop health problems that look like behavior problems. No trainer can fix a health problem, so it's best to rule out health problems first, rather than risk delaying relief.

PUPPY/ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR

Dogs under 18 months old are still teething and need to chew. See our *Confinement Training* and *Enrichment* handouts for tips to keep your dog out of trouble until they mature.

If you've ruled out all other reasons for your dog's behavior, it might be separation anxiety.

MILD TO MODERATE ANXIETY

You'll need to make a few changes at home and practice some exercises that help your dog feel comfortable when you leave. If these steps don't help, your dog's anxiety may be more severe and require additional interventions.

BLOCK SOUNDS

If your dog barks at sounds outside the house, use white noise to mask sounds and reduce reactivity. You can find free streaming video or buy an inexpensive white noise machine. Playing the radio or television does not provide a consistent enough sound or volume to be effective.

BLOCK SIGHTS

If your dog barks from a window or fence, blocking access to these areas reduces stress. Temporary solutions include window films, found at most hardware stores, or blocking off a problematic area of the yard.

CONFINEMENT AREA

For some dogs, staying in a smaller area reduces stress. Using a baby gate or metal ex-pen, section off an area where your dog can stay. See our *Confinement Training* handout for instructions.

GOODBYE KONG/CHEW

It can be helpful to associate your departure with a really good treat. The best treat for this purpose meets two criteria:

1. High-value - something your dog gets *really* excited about and doesn't get daily.
2. It will take at least 15 minutes to finish.

Examples include Kongs™ or beef tracheas stuffed with food. You can find Kong™ stuffing ideas online. Other options include cow hooves, bully sticks, and other long-lasting chews.

DEPARTURES

Dogs notice small details that tell them what's about to happen next and can trigger anxiety even before you leave. You can change what those details mean by changing what happens after. In the evening, put on your work shoes, then sit and watch TV. Pick up your keys, and then take your dog for a walk. Over time, your dog will no longer equate keys with you leaving, lowering their anxiety.

Changing the order of departure cues can also help. For example, if you usually grab your keys before putting your dog in their confinement area, try reversing the order.

SEVERE SEPARATION ANXIETY

If your dog's behavior falls into this category, a more intensive approach is necessary.

BEHAVIOR MEDICATION

In severe cases, we need to provide relief as quickly as possible, reducing stress to a manageable level so you can start a behavior modification program. This can be done through the use of anti-anxiety medications.

Most people are reluctant to “drug the dog.” These medications are not sedatives, however, and they directly address anxiety. When dogs are ill, we treat them with medication. With severe separation anxiety, dogs **are** suffering and anti-anxiety medication can relieve that suffering.

DESENSITIZATION

Teaching a dog with severe SA to be comfortable when alone is a slow, gradual process but with long-lasting results. To be successful requires the guidance of a qualified behavior consultant. Contact our **Behavior Helpline at (916) 504-2848** for more information.

SHOULD YOU CRATE YOUR DOG?

Many dogs are comfortable in a crate, but dogs with separation anxiety can get more upset when crated.

Putting a dog in a crate does not fix the anxiety and it can make things much worse for your dog.

Not only can your dog injure themselves trying to break free, but the daily stress can lead to immune deficiencies and other health issues.

So, unless your dog is already comfortable staying in a crate, it is not a solution for separation anxiety.



[†] Blackwell's Five-Minute Veterinary Consult Clinical Companion: Canine and Feline Behavior, Second Edition