



Separation Anxiety

For some dogs, the absence of their owner causes acute distress. Some of the behaviors these dogs might exhibit when you're away include:

- ◆ Excessive vocalization (barking, howling, crying).
- ◆ Inappropriate urination and/or defecation, usually in several areas of the house
- ◆ Destructive behavior (chewing, scratching, digging--often at doors, windows, or barriers in an attempt to escape).
- ◆ Lack of appetite – the dog won't eat when you're not there.

Is It Separation Anxiety?

Because these behaviors can stem from many different causes (boredom, lack of exercise, physical ailments, environmental triggers, incomplete housetraining, and so on), you'll need to determine if your dog truly has separation anxiety. Here are some signs:

- ◆ The behaviors occur when your dog is left alone. They may happen within a short time of your departure.
- ◆ The behaviors happen *every time* your dog is left alone, whether for short or long periods.
- ◆ Your dog follows you when you're at home and prefers to keep you in sight.
- ◆ Your dog gets very excited or even frantic when greeting you.
- ◆ Your dog seems to get anxious, excited, or depressed when you prepare to leave.

What Causes Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a panic response, not a dog's way of acting out spite or anger. Dogs who have previously rarely been left alone, whose household or routine is suddenly changed, or who go from spending a lot of time with their owner to much less may develop separation anxiety. We don't know why some dogs are prone to it and others in the same situation aren't.

Dealing with the Problem

Separation anxiety is a difficult problem to treat, requiring time and patience. It's important to understand that your dog is not motivated by anger, revenge, or spite. Punishing your dog for these behaviors won't help reduce them, and is likely to make them worse.

For low levels of anxiety, there are some simple steps you can take.

- ◆ Make all of your departures and homecomings calm and quiet. Ignore your dog for a period of time before you leave and after you arrive home.
- ◆ If your dog demands your attention when you're at home, ignore them. Give your dog attention when they're calm and not demanding.

- ◆ Make sure your dog gets plenty of exercise before you leave, and give them something to keep them occupied while you're gone, such as a food-filled chew toy like a Kong or something safe to chew.
- ◆ Teach your dog a *safety cue*, a signal to your dog that you will return: the safety cue could be turning on the radio or the television or presenting your dog with a safe toy or chew. You'll use your safety cue only when your absence will be short enough that your dog won't be upset--even if at first that's just the length of time it takes you to step out the door, count to five, and return. Remember to keep leaving and returning low-key.

For more difficult cases, you may need the help of an animal behavior specialist. The Sacramento SPCA offers behavior counseling services. For more information, call the Behavior Helpline at 916-504-2848, or check out the Behavior and Training services on our website at www.sspca.org/Behavior.html.

In the meantime, here are some steps you can start with:

- ◆ Desensitize your dog to the cues that let them know you're leaving: follow your normal routine for departures--get your bag and keys, for example, and put on your coat--then don't leave; just sit back down. Do this repeatedly, until your dog shows no anxiety when you do these things.
- ◆ Gradually add small steps: Prepare to leave, open the door, then close it and sit back down. Do this until your dog remains calm the whole time.
- ◆ The next step is to follow your routine, step out the door, then return and sit back down. Once again, repeat until your dog can stay calm.
- ◆ Add another step: prepare to leave, walk out the door and close it behind you, immediately return.
- ◆ Continue to build up the length of your absences very gradually, at first adding a few seconds, then a minute or two, making sure you don't progress until your dog isn't showing any anxiety at each level. Use your safety cue for these short, planned absences, but not for longer ones.
- ◆ As you work, make sure to remain calm as you depart and return. If your dog shows anxiety, allow them to relax, then back up a step and practice until they're successful before you move forward again.
- ◆ Once your dog is able to handle your absence for a few minutes, you can add time in minutes rather than seconds. As your dog is able to tolerate your being gone for short periods of a half-hour or more, you can probably progress even more quickly.
- ◆ How many repetitions you'll need at each level depends on the dog and the severity of the problem. For dogs with extreme anxiety, medication prescribed by your veterinarian may be paired with the behavior modification described above.

A great reference for people whose dogs suffer from separation anxiety or who want to prevent the problem in the future is *I'll Be Home Soon! How to Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety*, by Patricia McConnell, PhD. There are a number of web sites that sell this book. You can also find it at the Sacramento SPCA retail store.

For more information on behavior and training for dogs and cats, please visit our web site at www.sspca.org/pet-carebehavior/.