



Please Don't Leave Me! Handling Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is distressing to both dogs and their humans. It is an awful feeling for humans to know their dog may be in a panic every time they are left alone, and it's nothing short of miserable for the dog. The results speak for themselves with the destruction left behind. However, separation anxiety and general destructive behavior are often confused, but if you can answer yes to the questions below, it's likely your dog really does have separation anxiety:

- Does the behavior only occur when your dog is left home alone?
- Is the destruction in your 'exit path' meaning doors, baseboards, trim work, and flooring near where you leave are taking the brunt of the damage?
- When you return home, is your dog frantic to greet you?
- When you return home is your dog damp from excessive salivation?
- When you are home, does your dog follow you from room to room in a velcro fashion, resisting to even go outside alone?
- Does your dog pace, whine or get anxious when you are preparing to leave?
- Are the neighbors telling you that your dog is continually howling while you are gone?

So you answered yes to at least several of the above questions. You may be thinking: Why does my dog have separation anxiety? The truth is that we don't exactly know why some dogs develop separation anxiety while under the same circumstances others do not. We do know, as the name implies, it is a true anxiety disorder which means it is important for humans dealing with this behavior to understand that any sort of punishment will make this behavior worse (increase anxiety). Your dog tearing things up and inappropriately pottying in the house while you are away is not their attempt to show anger or seek revenge for being left alone, these actions are part of a true panic response. Some separation anxiety triggers can include:

- Sudden change in living situations, such as moving
- Sudden change in routine where the dog was rarely left alone, such as a caregiver returning to full-time work, or kids going back to school
- A change in family structure (including a child leaving for college, divorce, marriage, etc.)
- Returning from long periods of boarding

Some dogs seem to develop separation anxiety 'out of the blue.' If your dog, even if they have not experienced any of the above changes, is exhibiting signs of separation anxiety you should think about ways to make your dog feel better about being home alone. The good news is that separation anxiety does respond well to proper treatment and the earlier the intervention the better and faster the anxiety can be resolved.

Resolving Separation Anxiety

Mild cases of separation anxiety might be resolved without the help of a professional trainer. However, more severe cases almost always need intervention from somebody well versed in handling separation anxiety cases – a comprehensive behavior management plan and possibly

pharmacological intervention may be necessary. Below is a brief overview of some steps you can take to reduce or eliminate some cases of separation anxiety:

- Keep arrivals and departures low key. When you return home, do not lavish your dog with petting and praise. Instead, simply send them outside for potty. After they have finished their business, you can fall over them with praise and petting because now it's for their potty, not just because you returned home.
- Exercise your dog before you leave. A nice long walk or some quality play time chasing a toy or ball will go a long way into reducing the amount of energy your dog has bottled up. Plus exercise releases feel good hormones for dogs just like it does for people.
- Desensitize your dog to 'departure cues'. Departure cues are those activities that you engage in as you are preparing to leave the house. Some dogs even consider the alarm clock their initial departure cue so you have to think through your entire routine; however, some of the most common departure cues are grabbing keys, coats, purses, etc. To desensitize to these items, you simply pick up your purse or keys for example, toss your dog a tasty treat, and take the item to the couch with you to watch TV. Take your purse into the bathroom with you. Put on your coat to dust the house. Make all of the things that normally mean you are leaving now mean you are not necessarily leaving and food is coming when you touch these items.
- Teach your dog a safety cue that literally means you are coming right back. Start by saying "I'll Be Right Back" at times your dog is OK with your absence such as when you take out the trash, or get the mail, or even going to the restroom.
- If you normally have a radio or TV on when you are at home, leave it on when you leave the house. (Note, if you do not use these when you are home then using them when you leave can make them a departure cue - see bullet point above.)
- You can try leaving part of your dog's breakfast or some treats in a long lasting toy such as a stuffed kong or goodie bone. However, some dogs when anxious will not eat.
- Because separation anxiety 'works', IE, you always return after the antics, it is a good idea if you can to consider things such as doggie daycare, a dog sitter, etc. until the behavior can be brought under control.
- Separation anxiety often stems from a lack of confidence. Enroll in an obedience, dog sport, or scent work class. Classes provide confidence building exercises where your dog is having fun and is successful learning something new. They also improve your relationship with your dog, make them feel more independent, and provide a great outlet for both physical and mental stimulation which can calm the body and mind.

What Won't Help Separation Anxiety

- Confinement to a crate generally makes separation anxiety worse. Dogs can severely injure themselves trying to escape in a panic attack. Instead, try baby gating your dog in an open, familiar, but secure area.
- Any punishment for destruction or inappropriate potty accidents will only add to your dog's anxiety and will make separation anxiety worse.
- Making a big deal of your departure. The more you fuss and try to make them 'feel better' with lots of petting and praise and 'You'll be OK' will only make your dog more aware of your departure. You really want to slip out the door with them hardly noticing.
- Most of the time veterinarian prescribed medication (anti-anxiety or anti-depression medications) are ineffective unless combined with behavior modification and training. To get qualified professional assistance, contact us to set up an appointment.