

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

What is Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a panic disorder. Some dogs experience stress and exhibit signs of anxiety ranging from mild to extreme when their owner is absent. Some owners have come home to find the family dog has ripped up the couch or the neighbours pounding on the door to complain about non-stop howling.

Some of the common signs of separation anxiety include:

- Panting
- Shaking / shivering
- Lip-licking
- Compulsively following the owner from room to room
- Restlessness /pacing
- Drooling
- Vocalizations (whimpering, barking, howling)
- Defecation and urination indoors (in a normally house-trained dog).
- Destruction – chewing up the couch or trying to dig through the wall next to the door
- Self-Mutilation – licking or chewing at paws until they bleed

What Causes Separation Anxiety?

Dogs are pack animals and are wired to be part of a group. Modern-day life where dogs can be left alone for a big chunk of each day can be hard for such social animals, but only some dogs develop separation anxiety. Dogs that are overly attached and are constant attention-seekers are more likely to exhibit separation anxiety when the owner departs. Other dogs have experienced something traumatic such as rehoming or death in the family that has caused them to feel anxious when the owner is away.

Stressors that can trigger anxiety in dogs include:

- **Changes in the environment:** Such as the families moving to a new home (change in the dog's territory), renovations, or, in some cases even changes, in furniture or layout.
- **Changes in the family:** Such as the death of a family member or other pet, addition of a family member/roommate or a new pet, or familial stress such as arguments in the home or a divorce.

- **Changes in schedule:** For example, the owner taking a new job that requires shift work. Many dogs experienced separation anxiety after their owners returned to on-site work after working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Being rehomed:** This can be a major stressor in the dog's life: they have lost both their pack and their territory in one fell swoop. Some of the tips we list in the next section can help you prevent a rescue or dog adopted later in life from developing separation anxiety.
- **Predisposition to Anxiety:** Like people, some dogs are just wired to be more easily stressed and are more prone to develop anxiety and its associated behaviours as a response to that stress. Extreme noise shyness and constant attention-seeking may indicate an underlying anxiety disorder that makes these dogs more likely candidates for separation anxiety.

Tips for Preventing Separation Anxiety

- **Teach your puppy/dog to enjoy playing by itself.** Dogs that are able to amuse themselves will be less likely to develop separation anxiety as they age. Provide a lot of safe toys for them to play and only bring your puppy out to socialize with the family when he is being quiet and amusing himself (not when he is howling). There are a ton of interactive toys you can provide like stuffed kongs, snuffle mats (that you can hide treats in), chew toys, and interactive (puzzle-based) treat dispensers that encourage your puppy / dog to play by rewarding them with a treat.
- **Teach your dog to settle:** Teach your dog to go to a mat or dog bed and lay down. Reward the behaviour and gradually train longer periods of down time. You can provide a toy that the dog can amuse himself with. Remember to continue reinforcing this behaviour! If your dog has been laying quietly chewing on a toy, for example, go over and give him a treat or reward him with your attention. We want him to understand that "good things" happen when he is calm.
- **Keep comings and goings calm** – Do not make a big fuss of your dog when either coming home or leaving. Wait 10 or 15 minutes to start playing, cuddling or giving treats. You can distract your dog when you are leaving by scattering some treats so the dog has a positive experience and is kept busy finding the treats. While we are excited to see our dog and happy to be greeted when we come home you should wait till the first excitement has passed and the dog is calm before greeting them and giving them attention.

- **Give them a place they feel safe:** such as a crate or other defined space (such as a bathroom for example) that the dog will find comfortable and secure. Place something inside the crate that has your scent. Make the crate a fun and rewarding place to be by feeding them their meals or hiding treats and getting them used to being in it even when you are home. You will need to experiment with this as some dogs do better in a crate and others do not. Some dogs become panicked and work to escape and if this is adding stress then the crate may not be the right solution for your dog. If you do use a crate, do ensure your dog is not in a crate for longer than 2-3 hours at a time. It is important to gradually increase the amount of time the dog spends in the crate and ongoing reinforcement (when they are calm and settled) with attention and treats will help make this process more enjoyable for the dog.
- **Make sure they get enough exercise:** A tired dog is generally a happy dog and will be inclined to be more relaxed. If the weather is awful play indoor games that exercise the dog's body and mind by hiding treats and having them find them, play hide and seek, teach tricks, practice and train obedience skills such as sit, down, stay, touch, spin etc. It is important to tire your dog mentally as well as physically.
- **Vary your schedule:** Get your dog used to you coming and going at different times – go out for short trips without the dog. In multi-dog households occasionally take the other dog(s) and leave 1 dog behind so they can deal with being on their own. Gradually increase the amount of time away.
- **Kennel or Doggy Daycare:** Consider putting your dog in a daycare for 1 or two days a week or for an overnight stay or two in a boarding kennel that offers turn-outs outside and walks. These are great ways to get your puppy or dog used to different people and dogs, alter their routine and expose them to new environments. Doing this gradually will also be advantageous if you ever have to leave your dog due to a trip or family emergency.

Managing Separation anxiety in Dogs

There are a number of ways to manage separation anxiety ranging from crate training, and desensitization techniques through to management tools and anti-anxiety medications for dogs.

We recommend you include the tips for prevention above and then add these management tips.

- **Crate training** – I know we talked about crate training in the section above but we are going to mention this in the management section as well as it fulfills two purposes – it gives the dog a place they can feel safe and it also prevents your dog from destroying your house while you are out. Again, the crate is not an option for

all dogs, for some it will increase the panic and you may want to consider a small room when the dog can be confined where the amount of damage he can do is limited. You will need to work at making either the crate or a room feel safe for the dog. Provide something that smells like you as well as some interactive toys. Practice your "settle" with the dog in this area and remember to reward. Increase the amount of time your dog spends in either the crate or the room slowly.

- Desensitize the dog to leaving triggers. Dogs pick up on all the small signals we make when preparing to leave such as putting on our shoes or picking up our keys and may already start to panic before you even make it out the door. Desensitizing the dog to these signals will make departures less likely to cause a panic.

Desensitization techniques:

- Pick up your keys – carry them around for a while and put them back.
 - Pick up your purse and walk it to a different part of your house and put it down.
 - Put your coat on, wear it for 10 minutes and then hang it back up.
 - Put shoes on and go out the door and then come back in and take shoes off.
 - Start by leaving and returning in 5 minutes, then gradually build up the amount of time you are gone.
- **White Noise:** Leave a radio or tv on so the dog is not triggered by outside noises such as street noise or storms.
 - **Dogwalker:** Consider having a dog walker come and take your dog out for walk during the day. This will break up your dog's day, tire him out and give him a positive experience all of which will help with his anxiety.

Managing Severe Separation Anxiety

Incorporating the techniques above will help most dogs but... some dogs need more help.

Management Tools:

- **Thundershirts:** This compression shirt uses pressure to keep the dog calm (in concept this is similar to swaddling a baby).
- **Treat and Voice Cameras:** There are now a number of brands including the Furbo, Skybe, and Petcube dogs cameras that allows you to see your pet, speak to them and release treats remotely. (We have a client that has used one of these and said it was a game-changer).

- **Pheromone Diffuser:** This diffuser releases calming pheromones to help reduce anxiety.

Consult your Veterinarian

If your dog has moderate to severe separation anxiety then we highly recommend consulting with your veterinarian. There are now a great many options for anti-anxiety medications for your dog. Your veterinarian can on advise you if and which of the various anti-anxiety medications would be right for your dog . These drugs should be used in conjunction with a training program that incorporates the prevention and management tips above.

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