



BEHAVIOR SERIES

Reducing Separation Anxiety in Dogs

EVERYONE NEEDS A LITTLE TIME ALONE NOW AND THEN—unless of course you are a dog who suffers from separation anxiety. Dogs with separation anxiety exhibit behavior problems when they're left alone. Typically, they'll have a dramatic anxiety response within a short time (20–45 minutes) after their owners leave them. The most common of these behaviors are:

- Digging, chewing, and scratching at doors or windows in an attempt to escape and reunite with their owners
- Howling, barking, and crying in an attempt to get their owners to return
- Urination and defecation (even with housetrained dogs) as a result of distress

Why Do Dogs Suffer from Separation Anxiety?

We don't fully understand why some dogs suffer from separation anxiety and, under similar circumstances, others don't. It's important to realize, however, that the destruction and house soiling that often occur with separation anxiety are not the dog's attempt to punish or seek revenge on his owner for leaving him alone. In reality, they are part of a panic response.

Separation Anxiety Sometimes Occurs:

- When a dog accustomed to constant human companionship is left alone for the first time
- Following a long interval, such as a vacation, during which the owner and dog are constantly together
- After a traumatic event (from the dog's point of view), such as a period of time spent at a shelter or boarding kennel
- After a change in the family's routine or structure (such as a child leaving for college, a change in work schedule, a move to a new home, or a new pet or person in the home)

How Do I Know If My Dog Has Separation Anxiety?

Because there are many reasons for the behaviors associated with separation anxiety, it's essential to correctly diagnose the reason for the behavior before proceeding with treatment. If most, or all, of the following statements are true about your dog, he may have a separation anxiety problem:

- The behavior occurs exclusively or primarily when he's left alone.
- He follows you from room to room whenever you're home.
- He displays effusive, frantic greeting behaviors.
- The behavior always occurs when he's left alone, whether for a short or long period of time.
- He reacts with excitement, depression, or anxiety to your preparations to leave the house.
- He dislikes spending time outdoors by himself.

What to Do If Your Dog Has Separation Anxiety

For a minor separation anxiety problem, the following techniques may be helpful by themselves. For more severe problems, these techniques should be used along with the desensitization process described in the next section.

- Keep arrivals and departures low-key. For example, when you arrive home, ignore your dog for the first few minutes, then calmly pet him. This may be hard for you to do, but it's important!
- Leave your dog with an article of clothing that smells like you—such as an old t-shirt that you've slept in recently.
- Establish a "safety cue"—a word or action that you use every time you leave that tells your dog you'll be back. Dogs usually learn to associate certain cues with short absences by their owners. For example, when you take out the garbage, your dog knows you come right back and doesn't become anxious. Therefore, it's helpful to associate a safety cue with your short-duration absences.

Some examples of safety cues are a playing radio, a playing television, or a toy (one that doesn't have dangerous fillings and can't be torn into pieces). Use your safety cue during practice sessions with your dog. Be sure to avoid presenting your dog with the safety cue when you leave for a period

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