

Separation Anxiety in Dogs



This information is intended as a general guide only and does not take into account individual circumstances.

This guide may help you if your foster dog becomes disruptive or destructive when left alone. The dog might urinate, defecate, bark, howl, chew, dig or try to escape when you've left the house. Although these problems often indicate that a dog needs to be taught basic manners, they may also be symptoms of distress.

When a dog's problems are accompanied by other distress behaviours, such as showing anxiety when his foster humans prepare to leave the house, it may be an indication that the dog has separation anxiety (rather than just not being toilet trained or knowing which toys he can chew or not chew).

Separation anxiety is triggered when dogs become upset because of separation from their guardians, the people they're attached to. Escape attempts by dogs with separation anxiety are often extreme and can result in self-injury and household destruction, especially around exit points like windows and doors.

Some dogs suffering from separation anxiety become agitated when their guardians prepare to leave. Others seem anxious or depressed prior to their guardians' departure or when their guardians aren't present. Some try to prevent their guardians from leaving. Usually, right after a guardian leaves a dog with separation anxiety, the dog will begin barking and displaying other distress behaviours within a short time after being left alone—often within minutes.

When treating a dog with separation anxiety, the goal is to resolve the dog's underlying anxiety by teaching him to enjoy, or at least tolerate, being left alone. This is accomplished by setting things up so that the dog experiences the situation that provokes his anxiety (being alone), without experiencing fear or anxiety.

Common Symptoms of Separation Anxiety

The following is a list of symptoms that may indicate separation anxiety. The dog may display 1 or more of these symptoms when left alone.

Urinating and Defecating

Some dogs urinate or defecate when left alone or separated from their guardians. If a dog urinates or defecates in the presence of his guardian, his house soiling probably isn't caused by separation anxiety and may just not yet be toilet-trained or he could be scent-marking.

Barking and Howling

A dog who has separation anxiety might bark or howl when left alone or when separated from his guardian. This kind of barking or howling is persistent and doesn't seem to be triggered by anything except being left alone.

Chewing, Digging and Destruction

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Some dogs with separation anxiety chew on objects, door frames or window sills, dig at doors and doorways, or destroy household objects when separated from their guardians. These behaviours can result in self-injury, such as broken teeth, cut and scraped paws and damaged nails. If a dog's chewing, digging and destruction are caused by separation anxiety, they don't usually occur in his guardian's presence.

Escaping

A dog with separation anxiety might try to escape from an area where he's confined when he's left alone or separated from his guardian. The dog might attempt to dig and chew through doors or windows, which could result in self-injury, such as broken teeth, cut and scraped front paws and damaged nails. If the dog's escape behaviour is caused by separation anxiety, it doesn't occur when his guardian is present.

Pacing

Some dogs walk or trot along a specific path in a fixed pattern when left alone or separated from their guardians. Some pacing dogs move around in circular patterns, while others walk back and forth in straight lines. If a dog's pacing behaviour is caused by separation anxiety, it usually doesn't occur when his guardian is present.

Why Do Some Dogs Develop Separation Anxiety?

There is no conclusive evidence showing exactly why dogs develop separation anxiety. Some people believe that loss of an important person or people in a dog's life can lead to separation anxiety. Other less dramatic changes can also trigger the disorder. The following is a list of situations that have been associated with development of separation anxiety.

- **Change of guardian/family** - Being abandoned, surrendered to a shelter or given to a new guardian or family can trigger the development of separation anxiety. Similarly, the sudden absence of a resident family member can also trigger it.
- **Change in schedule** - An abrupt change in schedule in terms of when or how long a dog is left alone can trigger the development of separation anxiety. Eg. If a dog's guardian works from home and spends all day with his dog but then gets a new job that requires him to leave his dog alone for six or more hours at a time, the dog might develop separation anxiety because of that change.
- **Change in residence** – Moving houses can trigger separation anxiety

Medical Problems to Rule Out First

Incontinence Caused by Medical Problems

Some dogs' house soiling is caused by incontinence, a medical condition in which a dog "leaks" or voids his bladder. Dogs with incontinence problems often seem unaware that they've soiled. A number of medical issues including a urinary tract infection, hormone-related problems after spay surgery and other issues can cause urinary incontinence in dogs. Before attempting behaviour modification for separation anxiety for inappropriate toileting, consider if it is appropriate for the dog to see a vet to rule out medical issues.

Medications

There are a number of medications that can cause frequent urination and house soiling. If your dog takes any medications, speak to the Foster Care Officer or Welfare Officer.

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Other Behaviour Problems to Rule Out

Sometimes it's difficult to determine whether a dog has separation anxiety or not. Some common behaviour problems can cause similar symptoms. Before concluding that your dog has separation anxiety, it's important to rule out the following behaviour problems:

Submissive or Excitement Urination

Some dogs may urinate during greetings, play, physical contact or when being reprimanded or punished (note: we do not recommend reprimanding or punishing a dog in any situation). Such dogs tend to display submissive postures during interactions, eg. holding the tail low, flattening the ears back against the head, crouching or rolling over and exposing the belly.

Incomplete House Training

A dog who occasionally urinates in the house might not be completely house trained. His house training might have been inconsistent or it might have involved punishment (we do not recommend punishing a dog in any situation) that made him afraid to eliminate while his owner is watching or nearby.

Urine Marking

Some dogs urinate in the house because they're scent marking. A dog scent marks by urinating small amounts on vertical surfaces.

Juvenile Destruction

Many young dogs engage in destructive chewing or digging while their guardians are home as well as when they're away. If this occurs when you are home, it's probably not being caused by separation anxiety.

Boredom

Dogs need mental stimulation, and some dogs can be disruptive when left alone because they're bored and looking for something to do. These dogs usually don't appear anxious.

Excessive Barking or Howling

Some dogs bark or howl in response to various triggers in their environments, like unfamiliar sights and sounds. They usually vocalize when their guardians are home as well as when they're away. If this also occurs when you are home, it's probably not being caused by separation anxiety.

What to Do If Your Dog Has Separation Anxiety

Treatment for Mild Separation Anxiety

If the dog has a mild case of separation anxiety, counterconditioning might reduce or resolve the problem. Counterconditioning is a treatment process that changes an animal's fearful, anxious or aggressive reaction to a pleasant, relaxed one instead. It's done by associating the sight or presence of a feared or disliked person, animal, place, object or situation with something really good that the dog loves. Over time, the dog learns that whatever he fears actually predicts good things for him.

For dogs with separation anxiety, counterconditioning focuses on developing an association between being alone and good things, like yummy food. To develop this kind of association,

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every time you leave the house, you can offer your dog a puzzle toy stuffed with food that will take him at least 20 to 30 minutes to finish. For example, try giving your dog a KONG stuffed with something really tasty, like peanut butter, frozen banana or canned dog food and kibble. A KONG can even be frozen so that getting all the food out takes even more of your dog's time. Be sure to remove these special toys as soon as you return home so that your dog only has access to them and the high-value foods inside when he's by himself.

You can feed your dog all of his daily meals in special toys. For example, you can give your dog a KONG or two stuffed with his breakfast and some tasty treats every morning before going to work. Keep in mind that this approach will only work for mild cases of separation anxiety because highly anxious dogs usually won't eat when their guardians aren't home.

Treatment for Moderate to Severe Separation Anxiety

Moderate or severe cases of separation anxiety require a more complex desensitization and counterconditioning program. In these cases, it's crucial to gradually accustom a dog to being alone by starting with many short separations that do not produce anxiety and then gradually increasing the duration of the separations over many weeks of daily sessions. The following steps briefly describe a desensitization and counterconditioning program. Please keep in mind that this is a short, general explanation.

Fear must be avoided or the procedure will backfire and the dog will get more frightened. Because treatment must progress and change according to the pet's reactions, and as these reactions can be difficult to read and interpret, desensitization and counterconditioning will require the guidance of a the Foster Care Officer (Kemps Creek carers only) or Welfare Officer (AWL NSW branch carers only). A behaviouralist may also be required.

Step One: Predeparture Cues

As mentioned above, some dogs begin to feel anxious while their guardians get ready to leave. Eg. A dog might start to get distressed when he notices his guardian applying makeup, putting on shoes and a coat, and then picking up a bag or car keys. (If your dog doesn't show signs of anxiety when you're preparing to leave him alone, skip to step two below.)

Guardians of dogs who become upset during predeparture rituals are unable to leave - even for just few seconds - without triggering the dogs' extreme anxiety. The dog may see cues that you're leaving (like your putting on your coat or picking up your keys) and get so anxious about being left alone that he can't control himself.

One approach to this "predeparture anxiety" is to teach the dog that when you pick up your keys or put on a coat, it doesn't always mean that you're leaving. You can do this by exposing the dog to these cues in various orders several times a day, without leaving. Eg. Put on your boots and coat then just watch TV instead of leaving. Or pick up your keys then sit down at the kitchen table for a while. This can reduce the dog's anxiety because these cues won't always lead to your departure, so the dog won't get as anxious when he sees them. The dog may have many years of learning the significance of your departure cues so in order to learn that the cues no longer predict your long absences, the dog may need to experience the fake cues many, many times a day for many weeks. When the dog doesn't

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become anxious when he sees you getting ready to leave, you can move on to the next step below.

Step Two: Graduated Departures/Absences

Start with very short departures where you leave the house. The main rule is to plan your absences to be shorter than the time it takes for your dog to become upset. To get started, train your dog to perform out-of-sight stays by an inside door in the home, such as the bathroom. You can teach your dog to sit or down and stay while you go to the other side of the bathroom door. Gradually increase the length of time you wait on the other side of the door, out of your dog's sight.

You can also work on getting your dog used to predeparture cues as you practice the stay. For example, ask your dog to stay. Then put on your coat, pick up your purse and go into the bathroom while your dog continues to stay.

Progress to doing out-of-sight stay exercises at a bedroom door, and then later at an exit door. If you always leave through the front door, do the exercises at the back door first. By the time you start working with your dog at exit doors, he shouldn't behave anxiously because he has a history of playing the "stay game."

At this point, you can start to incorporate very short absences into your training. Start with absences that last only last one to two seconds, and then slowly increase the time you're out of your dog's sight. When you've trained up to separations of five to ten seconds long, build in counterconditioning by giving your dog a stuffed food toy just before you step out the door. The food-stuffed toy also works as a safety cue that tells the dog that this is a "safe" separation.

During your sessions, be sure to wait a few minutes between absences. After each short separation, it's important to make sure that your dog is completely relaxed before you leave again. If you leave again right away, while your dog is still excited about your return from the previous separation, he'll already feel aroused when he experiences the next absence. This arousal might make him less able to tolerate the next separation, which could make the problem worse rather than better.

You must judge when your dog is able to tolerate an increase in the length of separation. Each dog reacts differently, so there are no standard timelines. Deciding when to increase the time that your dog is alone can be very difficult, and many pet parents make errors. They want treatment to progress quickly, so they expose their dogs to durations that are too long, which provokes anxiety and worsens the problem. To prevent this kind of mistake, watch for signs of stress in your dog. These signs might include dilated pupils, panting, yawning, salivating, trembling, pacing and exuberant greeting. If you detect stress, you should back up and shorten the length of your departures to a point where your dog can relax again. Then start again at that level and progress more slowly.

You will need to spend a significant amount of time building up to 40-minute absences because most of your dog's anxious responses will occur within the first 40 minutes that he's alone. This means that over weeks of conditioning, you'll increase the duration of your

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departures by only a few seconds each session, or every couple of sessions, depending on your dog's tolerance at each level. Once your dog can tolerate 40 minutes of separation from you, you can increase absences by larger chunks of time (5-minute increments at first, then later 15-minute increments). Once your dog can be alone for 90 minutes without getting upset or anxious, he can probably handle four to eight hours. (Just to be safe, try leaving him alone for four hours and then work up to eight full hours over a few days.)

This treatment process can usually be accomplished within a few weeks if you can conduct several daily sessions on the weekends and twice-daily sessions during the work week, usually before leaving for work and in the evenings.

A Necessary Component of Separation Anxiety Treatment

During desensitization to any type of fear, it is essential to ensure that your dog never experiences the full-blown version of whatever provokes his anxiety or fear. He must experience only a low-intensity version that doesn't frighten him. Otherwise, he won't learn to feel calm and comfortable in situations that upset him. **This means that during treatment for separation anxiety, your dog cannot be left alone except during your desensitization sessions.** Fortunately there are plenty of alternative arrangements:

- If possible, take the dog to work with you.
- Arrange for a family member, friend or dog sitter to come to your home and stay with the dog when you're not there. (Most dogs suffering from separation anxiety are fine as long as someone is with them. That someone doesn't necessarily need to be you.)

Keeping the dog calm when you arrive home and having a low-key departure may not affect the frequency of signs of separation anxiety.* But some behaviourists still recommend this.

To Crate or Not to Crate?

In most cases, a dog with separation anxiety will get more anxious if left alone in a crate and it can make the separation anxiety worse. If you want to use a crate, you must first teach the dog to LOVE being in the crate before leaving him in there whilst you are out. The dog should also only be in the crate for a few hours maximum (**after** learning to LOVE being in it!) and only if he isn't showing signs of separation anxiety whilst inside the crate.

Provide Plenty of "Jobs" for Your Dog to Do

Providing lots of physical and mental stimulation is a vital part of treating many behavior problems, especially those involving anxiety. Exercising the dog's mind and body can greatly enrich his life, decrease stress and provide appropriate outlets for normal dog behaviors. Additionally, a physically and mentally tired dog doesn't have as much excess energy to expend when he's left alone. To keep your dog busy and happy, try the following:

- Give the dog at least 30 minutes of activity (eg. running and swimming) every day. Try to exercise your dog right before you have to leave him by himself. This might help him relax and rest while you're gone.
- Play fun, interactive games with your dog, such as fetch and tug-of-war.
- Take your dog on daily walks and outings. Take different routes and visit new places as often as possible so that he can experience new smells and sights.

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Frequently provide food puzzle toys. You can feed your dog his meals in these toys or stuff them with a little bit of peanut butter, cheese or yogurt. Also give your dog a variety of attractive edible and inedible chew things. Puzzle toys and chew items encourage chewing and licking, which have been shown to have a calming effect on dogs. Be sure to provide them whenever you leave your dog alone.

Make your dog “hunt” his meals by hiding small piles of his kibble around your house or yard when you leave. Most dogs love this game!

Read our Canine Enrichment handout for more ideas. After you and your dog have learned a few new skills, you can mentally tire the dog out by practicing them right before you leave your dog home alone.

Medications Might Help

The use of medications can be very helpful, especially for severe cases of separation anxiety. Some dogs are so distraught by any separation from their pet parents that treatment can't be implemented without the help of medication. Anti-anxiety medication can help a dog tolerate some level of isolation without experiencing anxiety. It can also make treatment progress more quickly.

On rare occasions, a dog with mild separation anxiety might benefit from drug therapy alone, without accompanying behaviour modification. The dog becomes accustomed to being left alone with the help of the drug and retains this new conditioning after he's gradually weaned off the medication. However, most dogs need a combination of medication and behaviour modification.

Contact the Foster Care Officer (Kemps Creek carers only) or Welfare Officer (AWL NSW branch carers) to discuss if a vet visit is required to potentially medicate the dog for a behaviour problem. *Note: The AWL NSW representative and vet will have the final say in regards to medicating or not medicating the dog.*

What NOT to Do

Do not scold or punish the dog. Anxious behaviours are not the result of disobedience or spite. They are distress responses! The dog displays anxious behaviours when left alone because he's upset and trying to cope with a great deal of stress. If you punish him, he may become even more upset and the problem could get much worse.

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