

(34) SEPARATION ANXIETY

How do I know if my pet's problem is due to separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety describes dogs that are overly attached or dependent on family members. They become extremely anxious and show distress behaviors of vocalization, destruction, house-soiling or inactivity when separated from the owners. Most dogs with separation anxiety try to remain close to their owners and become increasingly anxious the greater the separation. They may follow the owners from room to room and begin to display signs of anxiety as soon as the owners prepare to leave. Some of these dogs crave a great deal of physical contact and attention from their owners and can be demanding. During departures or separations they may begin to salivate or pant profusely, vocalize, eliminate, refuse to eat, become destructive or become quiet and withdrawn. Most often these behaviors occur within about 20 minutes of the owner's departure. While typically the behavior occurs each and every time the owner leaves, it can only happen on selected departures, such as work-day departures, or when the owner leaves again after coming home from work.

Are there other reasons that my dog may engage in these behaviors?

Many dogs, especially puppies enjoy chewing and engage in the behavior when they have nothing better to keep them occupied. House-soiling may be due to medical problems, leaving the dog alone for longer than it can control its bladder, or inadequate house-training. Vocalization may be due to territorial intrusion by strangers or other animals and can be a rewarded behavior if the dog receives any form of attention when it vocalizes or rewarded by the stimulus leaving. Some dogs will attempt to escape or become extremely anxious when confined, so that destructiveness or house-soiling when a dog is locked up in a crate, basement, or laundry room, may be due to confinement or barrier anxiety and associated attempts at escape. In addition, noise phobias such as a thunderstorm that passes through during the owner's absence, may lead to marked destructiveness, house-soiling, salivation and vocalization.

What can I do immediately to prevent damage?

This is an extremely difficult question. The goal of treatment is to reduce your pet's level of anxiety by training it to feel comfortable in your absence. This can be a long intensive process. Yet, most owners will need to deal with the damage or vocalization immediately. During initial retraining it may be best to hire a dog sitter, take the dog to work, find a friend to care for the dog for the day, board the dog for the day, or arrange to take some time off from work to retrain the dog. Crate training or dog proofing techniques may work especially for those dogs that already have an area where they are used to being confined. Crates should be used with caution however with dogs that have separation anxiety and/or also have barrier frustrations because they can severely injure themselves attempting to get out of a crate. It is important to choose a room or area that does not further increase the dog's anxiety. The dog's bedroom or feeding area may therefore be most practical. Motion detectors, balloons poised to pop on contact, electronic mats or indoor electronic fencing, or a pile of empty soda cans which have been set to topple when disturbed, could be used to "booby trap" potential problem areas. Taste deterrents may also be effective. If departures are relatively short, the destructive dog may be trained to wear a plastic or wire meshed basket muzzle so that it can continue to roam around the home unrestricted.

For vocalization, anti-bark devices may be useful (see our handout #17 on Barking), but the dog will continue to remain anxious, and the motivation to vocalize may be too strong for the products to be effective. Tranquilizers and anti-anxiety drugs may also be useful for short-term use, until the owner has effectively corrected the problem.

Lastly, punishment of destruction or house-soiling when you return is contra-indicated (see our handout #30 on Punishment). The destruction or house-soiling is a result of the pet's anxiety, not "spite" or being "mad" that you left. Punishment will only serve to make the pet more anxious at your return.

How can the dog be retrained so that it is less anxious during departures?

Since the underlying problem is anxiety, try to reduce all forms of anxiety, prior to departure, at the time of departure, and at the time of homecoming. In addition, the pet must learn to accept progressively longer periods of inattention and separation while the owners are at home.

What should be done prior to departures?

Before any lengthy departure, provide a vigorous session of play and exercise. This not only helps to reduce some of the dog's energy and tire it out, but also provides a period of attention. A brief training session can also be a productive way to further interact and "work" with your dog. For the final 15-30 minutes prior to departure, the dog should be ignored. It would be best if your dog was trained to go to its rest and relaxation area with a radio, TV, or video playing, as the owner could then prepare for departure while the pet is out of sight and earshot of the owner. The key is to avoid as many of the departure signals as possible, so that the dog's anxiety doesn't heighten, even before the owner leaves. Brushing teeth, changing into work clothes, or collecting keys, purse, briefcase or schoolbooks, are all routines that might be able to be performed out of sight of the dog. Owners might also consider changing clothes at work, preparing and packing a lunch the night before, or might even consider leaving their car at a neighbors so the dog wouldn't hear the car pulling out of the driveway. A few minutes prior to departure the dog should be given some fresh toys and objects to keep it occupied (see below) so that the owner can leave while the dog is distracted. Saying goodbye, will only serve to bring attention to the departure.

What can be done to reduce anxiety at the time of departure?

As you depart, the dog should be kept busy and occupied, and preferably out of sight, so that there is little or no anxiety. Giving favored treats and food for departure times (and taking them away when you are at home) can help keep the dog distracted and perhaps "enjoying itself" while you leave. Dogs that are highly aroused and stimulated by food may become so intensively occupied in a peanut butter coated dog toy, a fresh piece of rawhide, a dog toy stuffed with liver and dog food, or some frozen dog treats, that they may not even notice you leave. Be certain that the distraction devices last as long as possible so that the dog continues to occupy its time until you are "long gone". Frozen treats placed in the dog's food bowl, toys that are tightly stuffed with goodies, toys that are designed to require manipulation and work to obtain the food reward, toys that can maintain lengthy chewing, and timed feeders that open throughout the day are a few suggestions. Determine what best motivates your dog. For example, if a particular toy is highly successful provide two or three of the same type rather than toys that do not maintain your dog's interest. It may also be helpful to provide some or all of the dog's food during departures perhaps with a few special surprises in the bottom of the bowl. On rare occasions a second pet can help to keep the dog occupied and distracted during departures. (Also see our handout #20 on Destructive Chewing). Naturally, food will not be effective for dogs that will not eat when the owner is preparing to leave.

What should I do when I come home?

At homecomings, ignore your dog until it calms and settles down (this may take 10-15 minutes). Exuberant greetings or any type of punishment for misbehavior will only serve to heighten the dog's anxiety surrounding homecomings.

My dog starts to get anxious even before I leave. What can I do?

There are a number of activities that we do consistently prior to each departure. The dog soon learns to identify these cues or signals with imminent departure. On the other hand, some dogs learn that certain other signals mean that the owners are staying home or nearby and therefore the dog stays relaxed. If we can prevent the dog from observing any of these pre-departure cues (avoiding cues), or if we train the dog that these cues are no longer predictive of departure, then the anxiety is greatly reduced.

How can cues be avoided?

Consider wearing casual clothes when you leave and change at work. Leave your jacket, purse, briefcase or other work items in the car. Confine (and train) the dog to stay in a room where it cannot see or hear you preparing to leave.

What about the pre-departure signals that I cannot avoid?

Even with the best of efforts some dogs will still pick up on "cues" that the owner is about to depart. Train your pet to associate these cues with enjoyable, relaxing situations (rather than the anxiety of impending departure). By exposing the dog to these cues while you remain at home and when the dog is relaxed or otherwise occupied, they

are no longer predictive of departure. This entails some retraining while you are home. You get the items (keys, shoes, briefcase, jacket etc.) that normally signal your departure, and walk to the door. However, you **do not** leave, just put everything away. The dog will be watching and possibly get up, but once you put every thing away, the dog should lie down. Then, once the dog is calm, this is repeated. Eventually, the dog will not attend to these cues (habituate) because they are no longer predictive of you leaving and will not react, get up or look anxious as you go about your pre-departure tasks. Then, the dog will be less anxious when you do leave. This often allows the next step in re-training, planned departures.

What can be done to retrain the dog to reduce the dependence and following?

The most important aspect of retraining is to teach the dog to be independent and relaxed in your presence. Only when you have taught the dog to stay in place in its bed or relaxation area, rather than constantly following you around, will it be possible to train the dog to accept your departures.

First and foremost the dog must learn that attention-getting behaviors do not pay off. Any attempts at attention must be ignored. On the other hand, lying quietly away from you should be rewarded. Teach your dog that it is the quiet behavior that will receive attention, and not following you around, or demanding attention. Teach your dog to relax in its quiet area and to accept lengthy periods of inattention when you are home. Then he or she is used to this routine when you depart. For some dogs this may mean a formal program of “down”/”stays” (see below).

How can I teach my dog to accept my departures?

Formal retraining should be directed at teaching your dog to remain on its mat, in its bed, or in its crate or den area, for progressively longer periods of time (30 minutes or more). Start by using a favored treat as a prompt. Hold it in front of your dog, have him or her sit or lie down on command and give the food, praise and petting. At the next few commands, hold your hand out, but hide the food so that the dog is not certain whether it is there or not. Progress from a 1 second sit, to 2 seconds then 3 seconds, etc., until the dog will sit for at least 60 seconds.

Next practice the “stay” command, holding up the hand prompt saying “sit”, then “stay” and walk 2 or 3 steps away. Have the dog stay for 60 seconds and then walk back and give the reward with the dog staying in position. Once your dog will stay in place for 1 minute while you go across the room, sit and return, switch to intermittent rewards. Patting and praise is given every time, but food is only given every 2nd, 3rd or 4th time. However for each new step in training, use the food reward the first time or two. If you have trouble proceeding to this step, change to a leash and head halter to ensure success.

The balance of the training should proceed in the dog’s quiet or resting area, using as many cues as possible to help relax the dog. Mimic the secure environment that the dog feels when the owner is at home. Leave the TV on. Play a favorite video or CD. Leave a favorite blanket or chew toy in the area. These all help to calm the dog. You are teaching the dog to stay in its bed or confinement area for progressively longer periods of time before you return and give the reward. Initially train the dog to stay for 1 minute while you cross the room, return and give either the food or praise and affection. Increase this up to 30 minutes. From this point on, your dog should be encouraged to stay in its bed or crate for extended periods of time rather than sitting at your feet or on your lap.

Next, you begin to leave the room. Hold up your hand as prompt, give the ‘down-stay’ command, walk across the room, and go out of sight for a short time before returning to give the reward. Gradually make departures longer until the dog will tolerate leaving for up to 30 minutes.

Finally, practice short “mock” departures. During “mock” or graduated departure training, the dog should be exercised, given a short formal training session, and taken to its bed or mat to relax. Give the ‘down-stay’ command, a few toys and treats and leave. The first few “mock” departures should be just long enough to leave and return without any signs of anxiety or destructiveness. This might last from a few seconds to a couple of minutes. Gradually but randomly increase the time (e.g. 30 seconds, 1 minute, 2 minutes, 1, 2, 3, 2, 5, 7, 4, 7, 10, etc.). As the time of departures approaches 10 or 15 minutes, begin to include other activities associated with departure such as opening and closing the car door and returning, turning on and off the car engine and returning or pulling the car out of the driveway and returning.

Many dogs that destroy the home when left alone will stay in a car or van without becoming anxious or destructive. This is because the dog has learned to relax and enjoy the car rides, without the need for constant physical attention and contact. And, when the owner does leave this relaxed dog in the car, the departures are generally quite short.



The owner may occasionally leave the dog in the car during longer absences. The owner has trained the dog using inattention, relaxation and a graduated departure technique. What is very important is to progress slowly through the series of departures. If when you return, the dog is anxious or extremely excited, then the departure was too long and the next one should be shorter. This is an effective technique, but very slow in the beginning. The goal is to teach the dog “my owner is only going to be gone for a short time; they are coming right back; I can be good.”

Is drug therapy useful?

Drug therapy can be useful especially during initial departure training. Tranquilizers alone do not reduce the pet’s anxiety and may only be helpful to sedate your dog so that it is less likely to investigate and destroy. Often the most suitable drugs for long term use are anti-depressants, anti-anxiety drugs or a combination. Drugs alone will do little or nothing to improve separation anxiety. It is the retraining program that is needed to help your dog gain some independence and accept some time away from you.