



Issue: Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is the stress and anxiety a dog experiences when separated from a preferred associate (human or even another dog). Although it is not exactly known why dogs suffer from separation anxiety there are certain environmental experiences that are generally linked to the behavior. It is often seen in animals that have spent time in a shelter or a pet store with little socialization. It also can emerge after a change in their routine or environment (ex: vacation, a move, a change in family dynamics, re-homed). There are simple ways to prevent separation anxiety from emerging and there are techniques to diminish the anxiety once it occurs.

What is separation anxiety (SA)?

First off, SA is not your dog trying to get back at you for leaving them alone. It is not your dog trying to punish you by chewing up your remote control, soiling your living room rug or chewing the walls. Dogs do not have the same perspective of the world as humans. They do not understand the difference between right and wrong. They do, however, just like humans, develop ways of dealing with stress and anxiety.

How is it acted out?

The most common signs of SA are chewing or destroying items in your house (shoes, remotes, books, etc). SA should not be confused with “destructive chewing.” Chewing is a normal behavior in dogs, and that is why it’s important to provide all dogs with appropriate chew toys. However, dogs who chew to relieve the stress of SA usually only chew when left alone or chew most intensely when left alone.

It is common for dogs to seek out items that have your or one of your family members scent on it. Items that you touch with your hands and feet are the most common. The dog finds it calming to chew up these items.

Another common behavior is soiling the house. Anxiety in a dog sometimes stimulates their insides, and they just feel the urge to go. Barking or whining incessantly is also another big sign. This of course is your dog calling for you. Often we don’t know this happens because we are not home, but they hear about it from their not so happy neighbors.

How do you prevent it?

When you bring home your new dog it is important that they learn to deal with stress and anxiety and to learn that it is okay to be left alone. Just like human babies, it is important that we avoid rewarding undesirable demands for attention. When the dog is still being housetrained, or is just arriving into a new home, and is spending time in their crate, they may cry and bark when you leave the room. Don't respond to this with attention, in any way. Only check in on the dog once they have quieted down. Otherwise, they may learn that "If I bark, my human will come."

Also, try to maintain a normal routine. Do not spend every hour with your new dog. Go to the store, go to work, go out to dinner. Allow the dog the opportunity to learn that you will leave and come back. No big deal. The most important thing to remember is that when you return home, do not make it a big event. Be casual, ignore your dog for a minute or two, let them calm down before you release them from their crate/ pen. Then say "hi," but keep it calm. This is important because the dog needs to realize that you leaving and coming home is normal, no big deal!

What to do if your dog has separation anxiety (SA)?

Research has shown that SA-related behaviors occur within the first 15-30 minutes after you leave. Therefore a really effective way to diminish your dog's anxiety is to distract them for the initial period after you leave. The KONG toy, or something similar, stuffed with yummy treats is a great solution. Freezing KONGs with peanut butter or plain yogurt is a great way to prolong the time it takes for your dog to eat it. The longer they are happily slurping up the yummy food, the less stress they will feel being alone. You can give it to your dog right before you leave, that way they will be too busy eating yummy stuff to worry about you being gone. Your dog will make a positive association with you leaving. "I get special yummy treats when my human leaves!"

Also, there are some simple exercises that you can do to "desensitize" your dog to your coming and going. Dogs are master observers of their environment! It doesn't help that we humans are very predictable. Our morning routines are just that, routines, for us and for our dogs. Dogs with SA start getting anxious as soon as they see you put your shoes on, jingle keys, or put on your coat. Some even begin to show signs of stress when we brush our teeth or make coffee. These are triggers for dogs with SA. As soon as they observe them, they start to climb the ladder of stress.

By desensitizing, or taking away the meaning of these actions, you can keep your dog from climbing that ladder of stress before you've even walked out the door! How do you do that? Do these things as much as possible, even if you're not going out. Wear your keys on your belt so they sound no longer means anything specific. Put your shoes on and take them off, put your hat/jacket/scarf on, then take them off. You know your routine, be creative! Try to do this as much as possible. The more you do these

exercises, the faster they lose their meaning for your dog. Also, on days when you are not working, be sure to come and go, even if it's only for 5-10 minute trips. Research has shown that dogs tend to be more destructive on Mondays primarily because they've gotten use to the owners being home all weekend.

Keeping your dog in a crate or in a confined space can also help provide comfort for them because dogs gravitate to "den-like" areas. If successfully crate trained, dogs can then enjoy having their own "room."

Most importantly, do not make a big deal about returning home. Ignore your dog until they he/she calms down. No eye contact, nothing. It's hard to do but you're actually doing your dog a great favor. Once they calm down, say "Hi," calmly and give your pup some scratches.

What Not to Do

Do not use any type of aversive, corrective action or punishment! The use of anti-bark collars or shock collars does not help the dog learn how to deal with their anxiety. These tools do not provide any positive association with being left alone. Do not scold your dog when you get home either. They do not know the value of your destroyed property. They are dogs. Scolding, hitting, or yelling only teaches them that, "When my human comes home, I better lower my head and cower because they are always angry." Remember, your dog is not behaving badly or trying to "get back" at you. They are social animals and want your company. SA is a behavioral response to anxiety and stress.

If you need more help:

Seek out a consultation with a professional, certified behaviorist or a certified dog trainer.

Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers: <http://www.ccpdt.org>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org>