



Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is a behavior problem in which a dog becomes very anxious, worried, and stressed when their owner is separated from them. In other words, it is a panic attack.



Usually seen when the owner leaves the house. However, it can also occur when their owner simply

leaves the room. The dog has associated their owner's absence as a very unpleasant situation.

Signs

The key to a problem being separation anxiety is that it occurs when you leave them alone. They often start showing signs before you've actually left. They see the subtle signs of you leaving and the anxiety starts.

Dogs may become clingy and be at your side following you from room to room or cower in a corner. Usually the tail is tucked and the ears are down. They may start panting, pacing, or salivating. They may act anxious or depressed.



While you are gone, they may urinate or defecate in the house, bark or howl, or chew things up. In severe cases, the dog can destroy kennels, walls, and even jump through windows. Upon return, they are often frantic when greeting their owners.

Can we "fix" separation anxiety?

There is no quick fix to behavioral problems. "Fixing" separation anxiety involves a lot of time and devotion. Since it is an imbedded behavior, you will need to be working with your dog constantly to improve the behavior. Always stay positive and be patient.

Some severe cases may never be completely anxiety free when you leave, but through proper training and often medications, you can ease the anxiety to a level that works best for you and your dog.

Things to do

Training: Daily training sessions are required. The more you work with your dog, the quicker you will see change. Since your dog knows when you're leaving, you have to start with your leaving routine.

Start by having your dog sit and stay in one spot (such as a comfy bed or kennel). Then do one of your leaving signs such as putting your shoes on and then NOT leaving. When your dog is calm again, give treats. By giving treats when the dog is calm (not stressed, pacing, etc.), he learns calm behavior gets him good things.

Continue to do this throughout the day. Slowly add other aspects of your routine until the dog doesn't respond to any of them.

The next step is leaving the house. Do this several times and increase the time gone. For example, step outside for 10 seconds, then 30 seconds, then a minute, then 5 minutes. You must do it very slowly.

The next step involves adding the car component. Start the car and then return, back the car into the driveway or street and return, then take a trip around the block, etc.

When you return to the house, do not make a big deal about returning. Do not give treats at this time. The dog will learn that coming and going is not a big deal. The idea is to use baby steps to work up to the end result (desensitization).

Treats: Treats are important to give at the right time. The dog must be calm as to associate the calm mood with the positive treat. Treats can also be used as a distraction technique. If you throw a handful of kibble on the floor, the dog will be busy scrambling to eat rather than be worried that you are leaving.



There are also toys that are designed to release treats slowly. A great example is the Kong®. The center is hollow and you can smear peanut butter and treats in it.

By giving the yummy, treat-loaded Kong® only when you leave, your dog will soon look forward to it as you leave.

Toys: Bring out special toys that your dog only has when you are gone. Your dog will see it as a special treat with “new” toys to play with. This helps distract your dog from worrying and gives your dog a reason to associate you leaving with a good thing.

Crate training: Crate training your dog will vary depending on your situation. The dog must be comfortable in the crate before it can be used with separation anxiety.



The idea of the crate is to provide a safe haven for

your dog. It acts as a place for your dog to feel safe and prevents them from harming themselves or destroying the house.

They need to feel secure in the crate. To do this, make the crate comfortable by providing adequate bedding. Give treats in the crate and even feed in the crate. To work a crate into your training, start by having them sit and stay in the crate with the door open (and give treats).

Slowly work up to increased time intervals and closing the door. Read our article on Crate Training for more details.

Once your dog is comfortable in a crate, however, he must still be comfortable with you leaving before leaving him alone in it. He may be fine in the crate while you are home, but become terrified when you leave. If that happens, he will never want to go into a crate again.

Medications: Several drugs can be used in combination with training. It can take 4-6 weeks for anti-anxiety medicine to start working so give it time.



With severe cases, the dog may not respond to the medicine but it's usually worth trying.

Alternative therapies: If you don't want to use drugs, there are other therapies available. There are herbal products and prescription food designed to calm your stressed pet.



A Thundershirt can be placed on your dog to swaddle them similar to swaddling a baby. These methods will work best in mild cases or at the beginning of a problem.



Usually the best approach is to work with your veterinarian and a trained behaviorist. This is a serious problem and you need to do things the right way in the right order for success. Your veterinarian can prescribe medications if needed.

Summary

All of this takes time and patience but you will both be much happier in the end. **During the training process, it's important that you never leave your dog home alone.** You will need to have a pet sitter come stay with him, take him to someone's house, or to a doggy day care.

Don't take him with you in your car and then leave him there. He can easily destroy the inside of your car just like your house. If you leave him even once before he's ready, you will lose much of the training you've been working on.

Don't punish a dog with separation anxiety. It will only make the anxiety worse. Unfortunately, getting another dog won't help either. They want to be with humans not with other dogs.

Remember – these are not bad dogs. They are severely anxious dogs that are often terrified when you leave them alone. Take steps early to improve the situation for your best chance of success.

