

SEPERATION ANXIETY



This information in this handout is a guide only

Most dogs would prefer to have their owners around all day but adapt well to most situations if they receive sufficient exercise, playtime and attention. However, some dogs do not cope at all and this can be a real problem.

Separation anxiety is a behavioural problem that occurs in dogs that become highly attached to an owner or another dog in the family, and become extremely distressed in their absence.

What are the signs of separation anxiety?

The signs include destructiveness, barking, urinating or defecating inside, escaping, or sometimes subdued inactivity. Often signs of fear or anxiety start as the owner prepares to leave the house, jangling keys and turning off lights. Affected dogs start panting, trembling, and following the owner around. Owners report that dogs don't eat food left out for them in the morning, but will eat at night after the owner's return. They cry and whine while the owners are out.

Why would my dog have separation anxiety?

There are several reasons for these dogs to develop separation anxiety, and it depends on breed, lifestyle (some re-homed dogs may have undergone previous traumatic separations), age (older dogs), and a change in house or routine which causes stress (including children leaving home, or separation of partners). Some re-homed dogs bond very strongly with new owners who show them love and affection.

How is separation anxiety diagnosed?

Other canine behaviour problems have similar signs and must be differentiated from separation anxiety. House-soiling may be related to medical conditions and these must be ruled out. Other reasons for house-soiling are marking, inadequate housetraining, and prolonged time periods without access to proper elimination sites.

Barking may be part of territorial displays. Young dogs with limited outlets for play may be destructive and chew. Dogs that attempt to escape may simply be bored and are inadequately

contained, or they may suffer from a backyard phobia or panic disorder. Noise phobias to such things as thunderstorms may initiate destructive behaviour.

A detailed behavioural history, physical examination, and a good description of the signs and when they occur are necessary to reach a diagnosis of separation anxiety.

How do you treat separation anxiety?

Treatment of separation anxiety often involves the use of anti-anxiety medication. Used correctly, medication may significantly decrease the time taken to train the dog to be less anxious when left alone. Initial prevention of the problem could involve the use of dog-sitters, taking the dog to a friend or neighbour who is at home during the day, or boarding it. Punishment is ineffective and may well increase anxiety.

It may be possible to allow your dog access to the house in your absence with an electronic dog-door. If it must stay outside, provide it with a secure enclosed area containing some old clothes that smell of the owner.

If your dog can be distracted from your departure by food or toys, anxiety may not develop. Try interactive toys that hide food, such as Kong toys, or ones that are designed to require manipulation and work to obtain the food reward.

Training your dog to get used to your absence.

Desensitisation to your pre-departure routine is part of the retraining procedure. It is very important to move slowly through the steps listed below. Only progress to the next step when you have mastered the previous one with a calm dog. Make sure you reward the calm behaviour and remain relaxed yourself when you return.

- Pick up the keys and walk to the door, then return. Reward the dog if he is calm. Repeat many times.
- Put on then take off your coat (or whatever other thing you always do before you go out). Reward the dog if he is calm. Repeat many times.
- Open then shut the door. If your dog remains relaxed, reward him. Repeat many times. When successful with these practices, move on to actually (pretending to) leave.
- Getting your dog used to your absence is a lengthy procedure that takes a lot of time and effort on the part of the owner and is best done with collaboration with your vet or an animal behavioural specialist.

The key is lots of practice and getting the dog used to short, happy periods alone.

- Go through your normal leaving routine, shoes, keys etc. Give your dog something GREAT to chew on and leave for 1 minute. Come back calmly, and ignore the dog. After a few minutes you can quietly pat or praise if the dog is behaving.
- Repeat pretending to leave for 1 minute until the dog can remain happily alone. Then pretend to leave for 2 minutes. Leave the dog with something yummy that takes a while to chew. Come back calmly and ignore the dog. After a few minutes, you can quietly pat or praise if the dog is behaving.

The aim of this exercise is to desensitise the dog to the cues of your departure, and to teach the dog that nice things happen while you are gone. You should aim to increase the times in the practices very gradually. Don't increase the time while the dog is still fretting.

How do I stop my dog being so clingy?

It is also important to try to reduce the dog's dependence on the owner. Do not give exuberant greetings, and sharpen up obedience skills to gain better control over your dog.

Don't reward attention-seeking behaviour. Ignore your dog if he follows you around or demands attention; reward him when he sits or lies quietly. Provide him with a quiet, secure rest area, and teach him to use it. Provide him with more stimulation in your absence.

Remember, in extreme cases, it may be necessary to discuss medication with your vet. Anxiety relieving medications can help get the dog calm enough for the behavioural practices to have an effect.