



## SEPARATION ANXIETY IN DOGS

Separation anxiety (SA) in dogs is a phobia of being alone, apart from humans. Dogs with SA panic when left alone, often displaying behaviors such as:

- scratching, digging, or chewing furniture, flooring, or exit points like windows and doors;
- self-injury when attempting to escape;
- uncontrollable urinating or defecating;
- vomiting or excessive drooling; and/or
- vocalizing for long periods of time.

While the severity and symptoms may differ between dogs, they all share the same underlying fear of being left. A major factor that distinguishes SA from other behavioral issues and conditions is that these behaviors occur exclusively in the absence of people, usually within minutes of being left alone.

### Why do dogs suffer from separation anxiety?

Around 17% of dogs develop SA in their lifetimes (Eli Lilly drug company). Though we don't know exactly what 'causes' SA, several risk factors have been identified, including:

- rehoming;
- moving to a new home;
- change in schedules or routines;
- never being alone before;
- death of a family member or introduction of a new family member (human or animal);
- a traumatic event like being shipped in airline cargo or a natural disaster; and/or
- experiences during puppyhood including illness, being a singleton, or removal from a litter too young.

### How do you help a dog with separation anxiety?

For mild cases of SA, some simple techniques and items described below can help dogs cope with being alone. For more severe cases, desensitization in combination with behavioral medication (described in the following section) are considered the gold standard for treatment of SA.

### General recommendations:

- **Keep comings and goings low key.** Acting overly excited when you come home or leave can heighten your dogs' arousal state, causing them to become more anxious when left alone. Ignore your dog for several minutes before leaving and after returning so you don't signal a change in emotional state.
- **Practice semi-absences.** Reduce the contrast between when you're gone and when you're home. As hard as it may be, don't provide your dog with constant attention. Regularly interrupt your dog shadowing you around the house continuously when you're home by baby-gating your dog into another room for short periods. Do many, many extremely brief (1-30 seconds) semi-absences with no fanfare on departure or arrival.
- **Teach 'go to place' and 'stay/relax'.** *Teaching your dog to reliably go to his 'place' (a mat or dog bed) and to 'stay/relax' on it will help build confidence by allowing him to practice a mini-absence from you while in a relaxed state. At first, give your dog yummy treats when he goes to the mat, then when he lays down and relaxes, slowly increasing the time he stays on the mat laying down. Once your dog understands 'go to place', gradually increase the distance you move away from him while he lays on the mat in a relaxed state. Your goal is to be able to move briefly out of sight while he remains in a relaxed 'stay' position. As you progress, you can do this during the course of your normal daily activities. For example, if you're watching television with your dog by your side and you get up for a snack, tell him to stay, and leave the room. When you come back, give him a treat.*
- **Provide enrichment and interactive toys.** Make sure your dog has social, mental, and physical stimulation on a regular basis. Provide your dog with training sessions, give him play time with people and other dogs, go for walks, and play fetch. Interactive toys containing food like Kongs, treat-dispensing toys, food puzzles, feeder toys, and snuffle mats provide entertainment for your dog and can be incorporated into semi-absences and full absences. These toys can help increase your dog's confidence and create a positive association with his confinement area.

- **Offer other stress-alleviating items.** For more mild cases, there are several items available that may help alleviate their stress or anxiety when being left alone. ADAPTIL products like collars, air diffusers, and spray are composed of a synthetic version of 'dog appeasing pheromone', which when released can calm and relax dogs.

### **Desensitizing departures and absences**

The proper treatment for SA involves gradually and systematically getting your dog used to being alone through the use of desensitization. In this process, your dog learns to remain calm as you as you practice leaving for very brief periods of time.

Desensitize departure cues by incorporating your normal departure activities (e.g., putting on your coat and shoes, grabbing car keys, etc.), which can trigger your dog's anxiety. Engage in your normal departure activities then sit back down. Repeat this until your dog shows no signs of distress upon you leaving. Next, engage in your normal departure activities, approach the door, then sit back down. Once your dog is not displaying distress behaviors, open the door, then go sit back down. Next, open the door, walk through it, turn and sit back down. Next time, close the door behind you then immediately return. Gradually start increasing the amount of time you're on the other side of the door by a matter of seconds, then minutes.

If your dog begins displaying signs of distress or anxiety (e.g., panting, pacing, vocalizing, scratching/chewing exit points, etc.) at any point, you have gone too far. You'll need to go back a step to where your dog is not displaying these behaviors, then proceed to the next step. It will be slow progress at first, when you're only increasing your intervals by a few seconds at a time, but once you get up to longer intervals, you'll be able to bump up the intervals by several minutes at a time. Do this several times throughout the day if possible, or during a longer session once a day.

### **Medication**

Anti-anxiety medications in combination with behavior modification have been shown to be an effective approach to treating SA. Consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist to see if your dog would benefit from short-term and long-term anti-anxiety medications. Keep in mind that drug therapies alone will likely not resolve more severe SA; it is imperative to use these medications in conjunction with the behavior modification techniques described above.

### **What won't help dogs with separation anxiety**

It is important to remember that when treating SA, the focus should not be on the symptoms, but on the underlying problem. Using aversive training techniques to control some of the problem behaviors, such as a shock or citronella collar for a dog that barks excessively when alone, will not help the dog's SA, and will likely only make a dog more fearful or anxious when left. By reducing the dog's fear of being alone, the outward signs will resolve as well.

Some other things that will not help a dog with SA overcome his issues are:

- **Punishment:** Punishing a dog after returning home to find a mess is not beneficial for a dog with SA. 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.
- **Getting another pet:** Your dog's SA is based in his attachment to his people, so adding another dog to the family will likely not improve his SA and may add even make him more anxious.
- **Crating your dog:** Many SA dogs panic even more when confined and will still engage in SA behaviors like howling and eliminating. Further, many dogs will attempt to escape and may injure themselves in the process.

### **Interim solutions**

Treating separation anxiety can take weeks or months. In order to keep your dog safe, your home intact, and to see the best results, it is best to not leave your dog alone while working on the procedures described above. Some options are taking your dog to a dog daycare facility, finding a pet sitter, leaving your dog with a friend, family member, or neighbor, or taking your dog with you to work if possible.

### **Further reading & sources**

- Patricia McConnell: *I'll Be Home Soon! How to Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety*
- Malena DeMartini-Price: *Treating Separation Anxiety in Dogs*

# Animal behavior questions?

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