

Separation Anxiety In Dogs



Separation anxiety can cause a dog to be destructive, cause problems with the neighbors and is really hard on the dog

What is Separation Anxiety in Dogs?

Most dogs sleep, bark occasionally or chew their toys when left alone in the house or in a room without access to you. In general, they pretty much do what they normally do when you are with them. Dogs with separation anxiety, however, can make leaving the house or even the room an emotional and difficult chore. Separation anxiety can cause them to whine or bark incessantly, pace, chew furniture, destroy blinds, rip up carpeting, eat through drywall, climb bookcases, mutilate plants or scratch at windows and doors.

Dogs with severe separation anxiety can destroy thousands of dollars in furnishings, go through plate glass windows, bloody their mouths and paws and defecate and urinate everywhere. Their howling, barking and whining can also lead to problems with neighbors and landlords.

Since dogs are pack animals, they naturally wish to be with people all the time. Most adult dogs (12-16 months and older depending on breed) can be left alone for 8 hours or even longer if they have access to a yard for elimination. They are unhappy, they are bored but do not become problems.

A dog with separation anxiety is different. When you go to the door to leave, he becomes anxious and may try to leave with you. You manage to get outside and close the door but you can still hear him whining and scratching on the inside. You are upset, your dog is upset and you do not know what you will find when you return. When you return to find your house in a shambles, you get upset at your dog (who has been upset since you left) who gets even more upset. This cycle repeats and builds upon itself until you are ready to give your dog away.

Signs of distress that occur only when your dog does not have access to you define separation anxiety. This anxiety usually begins when he thinks you are getting ready to leave. It can also be exhibited if you put him in a room and close the door behind you. If your dog is anxious and distressed all the time, you need to look for another underlying cause.

Separation anxiety is not affected by whether the owner is loving and attentive or not. Two dogs of the same breed living with the same owner may exhibit completely different behaviors. One dog can whine, pace and bark while the other lies down and go to sleep.

Like many human behaviors, it could be caused by brain chemistry. A dog that is genetically predisposed may have the condition triggered by stress. Some breeds have a greater tendency to suffer from separation anxiety. It is worth doing some research into your dog's breed(s) to help you localize the problem. Depending on the individual and the severity of the disorder, the cure could range from simple behavioral modification to a prescription for antidepressants from the vet.

When it is Not Separation Anxiety!

Sometimes tearing the drywall, eating the baseboard, raiding the cupboards is not separation anxiety, it is simply bad behavior or your dog having a delightful time when you are not home to correct him.

Like teenagers having a secret bash when the parents are away for the weekend, some dogs have learned that they can have a great deal of fun when you are gone.

In order to find out what is really happening when you are away, set up a video camera and see how your dog behaves. Does she look happy with an open, relaxed mouth and relaxed body? Does she look anxious, upset, angry or tense? Dogs with separation anxiety can drool so much that they wind up soaking their surroundings and themselves.

Dogs with separation anxiety often express their frustration or anxiety at the barrier between you and them. This is usually the front door, the front windows the carpeting and the floor in the front of the house. In their distress, they want to get through these barriers and find you.

If you do not have a video camera, you can leave and then walk back quietly to your house and take a look inside. You may find out that your dog is simply in need of training and more toys.

Causes of Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Separation anxiety can appear in dogs that are not properly socialized, dogs that have been shuttled from one home to another, dogs that have a more dominant relationship with you and dogs that are naturally nervous:

One school of thought about separation anxiety is the idea of pack leadership. She may be aghast that you, her pack member, has gone away without her permission. She may feel so dominant in the household that she becomes distressed when her underlings leave. She has a skewed understanding of the social structure in the house and becomes upset when left alone. She anxiously claws through the door or at the blinds looking for her pack.

He may think that he will never see you again and is worried about how he will survive. A dog that has been through a burglary, earthquake, thunderstorm, fire or other traumatic event may be afraid of being without you just in case it happens again.

He may be afraid of being left alone in the house. This may sound silly but a golden retriever we knew hid behind the potted plants until he got a friend.

Whatever the cause, here are some techniques for solving separation anxiety.

Check Out the Dog and the Environment

To begin with, make sure that nothing is physically ailing your dog. A disorder, disease or pain of some kind could be causing your dog to become unusually sensitive to changes in his environment. For example, dogs on low protein, low fat reducing diets can express their hunger through unexpected ways such as whining excessively.

If your dog is healthy, it is worth checking out his environment for sources of discomfort. Is it too hot or too cold? Are there threatening sounds such as other dogs barking? Are there strange sounds or smells coming from a nearby house or apartment?

If you cannot find anything wrong with either your dog or her environment, then it is time to tackle separation anxiety directly.

Leave Home Quietly and come in Quietly

As often as you can, step out of the front door while your dog is watching as well as when he is not watching. At first, step outside for a few seconds and then come right back in before he has a chance to get upset. Do this several times a day varying the amount of time you are outside. Vary what you do as well. Take your coat, keys and briefcase sometimes. At other times just take a walk around the block.

If you normally leave through the garage door, substitute that for the front door. The idea is to remove the association between a specific door and your dog being left alone for a long time. If you have a specific routine before you leave for the day, try varying the routine. You can also go into a room, close the door behind you leaving your dog outside (or vice versa). This accomplishes the same purpose as actually leaving the house if your dog normally gets upset when you put a door between you.

Your dog can become a prisoner of habit. If he is used to feeling stressed and anxious whenever he sees you go to the hall closet and take out your coat, force of habit can make him continue to do so. Mix up the routine, leave your coat and briefcase and keys in the car in the garage and slip out quietly. Soon he will not be able to tell whether you are leaving for 10 seconds or 3 hours.

Try not to make a big show of leaving or coming home. A dog with separation anxiety finds the experience of you leaving very stressful so be the calm one! *When you return, greet him calmly and ignore his crazy antics. Just come and go without any fanfare. For some dogs, completely ignoring him for 15 minutes before leaving and after coming home works very well.*

Give Your Dog Plenty of Exercise, Socialization, and Fun

Give Your Dog A dog that is tired and happy is more likely to sleep and not get into trouble. If you can arrange it, take him on a long walk right before you leave.

A long walk or jog consists of 1-2 hours (or more if you can manage it) of active walking, jogging, or running with your dog, not a leisurely 20 minute stroll down the street. If your dog is particularly active and you are not, you may have to consider biking, skating or scootering with him. As a last resort, you may want to consider a treadmill.

Although a romp at the dog park is an option, many dogs do not get much exercise at parks and a dog with separation anxiety needs to move at a constant, fast pace over a long period of time to ease that anxiety and become tired and satisfied. If you have a retriever, an hour or so of continuous running and retrieving may do the trick.

If you plan on exercising with your dog before you head to work in the morning, you may need to wake up several hours ahead of your normal schedule. With a large, young dog you will need to add 1-2 hours of walking or 1 hour of cycling, roller—blading or active retrieving. You will then want a cool down period before feeding him and leaving him for the day.

If you find that a significant increase in exercise decreases the separation anxiety, you can then see if exercise at more convenient times works as well.

Feed Him Before You Leave

Some dogs become more tense if they are hungry. A stomach-filling meal with complex carbohydrates like oatmeal can make him sleepy and relaxed. The goal is to have a well-exercised, well-fed dog happily engaged in snoozing before you leave.

Leave the Radio On

An empty house can be unnerving to some dogs. They can hear every car, pedestrian, delivery person and squirrel that is outside the door. A strange sound can set off whining and barking. A radio can add some white noise to the environment and dampen his reaction to what is going on outside.

You can try a classical music station or some mild talk radio. Controversial talk radio, with lots of people arguing and loud commercials can make the situation worse. Try National Public Radio (no commercials, lots of serious chat) which is usually available on a local FM station in your area.

Give Him Something to Do

A second pet could be the answer. With a second pet in the house, your dog won't feel as abandoned. If this is not possible, try some engaging activities:

Try giving him a cardboard box to shred (just make sure he is not the type to eat the box). Give him a treat-filled dog toy such as a puzzle box or rubber chew made just for dogs. Some people swear by hollow rubber chew toys stuffed with the daily meal, plugged with cream cheese and then frozen solid. You will have to try out a few concoctions and toys to see what works. You will want to have one that will occupy your dog for an hour or so or at least long enough for him to forget that you have left him alone!

This type of treat works if your dog only receives this when you leave the house. Making a strong association between a special treat and being alone can make the being along less frightening, frustrating or boring.

Give him several chew toys that you rotate every few days. These could include rope toys, nylon bones and other safe toys.

Dogs are intelligent creatures and sometimes they get into trouble out of boredom and frustration. Try teaching your dog basic obedience (sit, heel, stay, etc.) and some party tricks (play dead, fetch slippers, etc.) It will give him something to think about when he is alone.

Try A Crate

If your dog is seriously destructive to your house, you may have to confine him while you modify his behavior. Crates come in many different styles. The best one for you will depend on your dog. Crates can cost \$50 and more for a medium sized one to over \$100 for a large size and are well worth it. A sturdy crate, bought when your dog is a puppy, will last a lifetime.

Crates are only temporary solutions and dogs should not remain in them for more than a few hours at a time. Although it may seem cruel to confine a dog, many dogs feel secure in their crates and the den-like confined space can help them doze off.

Make sure you have crate-trained your dog before you leave him alone for any length of time. The crate should be a place of security and pleasant experiences and never a punishment or a prison.

When Not to Use Crates

Not all dogs take to crates. Some dogs are claustrophobic and will suffer even more when confined to a crate. They may do better in a room with a view and sometimes even better if given the run of the house but with the additional behavior modification as discussed in this article. If your dog claws at the crate door bites the bars and shows excessive distress at being placed in a crate, the crate is probably not for him.

Try an Anti Bark Citronella Collar

Some dogs bark incessantly when their anxiety levels are high. If this is an issue, try a citronella collar that spurts a cloud of citronella into your dog's face when he barks. The collar consists of a battery-operated box that is loaded with citronella. The box is attached to a webbing collar that goes around your dog's neck. The vibrations from your dog's bark will set the collar off. The collar sends a spurt of citronella which surprises your dog into silence. Dogs quickly learn the routine.

This is a fairly expensive product but it can provide immediate relief for some dogs. The box may be too large and heavy for very small dogs and it may not work at all for very stubborn or overly sensitive dogs. The collar may increase the anxiety of some dogs. You may have to thin or trim the neck hair of long-haired dogs or the vibrations from barking may not register with the box. In addition, with double coated dogs, the citronella may simply go into your dog's coat. It is both the spicy scent and the surprising spurt of air that gets your dog's attention. For some dogs, using the collar without the spray is sufficient.

You may not have to use the collar for an extended period of time. It should be used in conjunction with behavior modification, increased socialization, increased exercise and possible medication. There are also similar collars that provide electric shocks instead of the spurt of air with citronella. If you are desperate to stop incessant barking and you have a highly insensitive dog this may be a last resort.

As with all such tools, these collars are effective when they are on and in working order. They do not train your dog but are a temporary measure only.

Aroma and Dog Appeasement Pheromone or DAP

Dogs have such highly developed senses of smell that aromatherapy may work better for them than it does for humans. Consider adding some calming scents, such as lavender, to his environment. A plugin air freshener or a stick scent-diffuser are safe ways to provide long-lasting and continuous scent.

Associate the scent with pleasant experiences such as receiving favorite treats or having a soothing massage. This may or may not work but at least your house will be nicely scented.

A more targeted approach are products that mimic the scent of a nursing mother. Since dogs associate nursing with feeling calm and secure, this product hopes to recreate that feeling. The Dog Appeasement Pheromone or DAP comes in a variety of forms including a collar, a plug-in diffuser and a spray. It may take some time but it is said to work very well with some dogs and not at all with other dogs.

Training

The importance of training your dog cannot be overemphasized. A well trained dog has something to fill his mind, has better control over himself and is more likely to respond to you when you tell him to be calm and quiet. If your dog is not trained, you can enroll him immediately in a training class, hire a professional trainer or home school him yourself.

Place particular emphasis on sit-stay and down-stay commands. A high strung dog will find it difficult to sit-stay or down-stay for any length of time. This will teach him self-discipline. If you can make him sit-stay or down-stay while you leave the room, this will make it much easier for him to stay calm when you leave the house.

Make your dog stand on his own four legs. Do not let him lean against you on the couch, sit in your lap or place himself on top of your feet or legs. If you have a problem with this, make him down-stay in his own bed or place him in a crate while you are in the same room. The assertive dog will learn that she cannot do everything she pleases while a fearful dog will develop the confidence to be on her own.

Doggy Day Care

In order to save your house and keep your sanity, you may want to take your dog to daycare while you modify his behavior. You can then go about your day without having to worry about what awaits you at home.

The advantage of daycare is that it helps socialize your dog and teach her that being without you can be enjoyable. Since lack of socialization could have triggered the anxiety in the first place, day care may help hasten the behavior modification. If your dog is around other happy and engaged dogs all day even when his family is gone, he can learn to be less anxious.

Initially you may have to take him every day that you are at work or away for any length of time. Over time, you can balance out his time at doggy daycare with a significantly increased exercise routine. You can increase his regular exercise and decrease the time he spends at doggy daycare.

Medications: Melatonin

Melatonin is a hormone that is produced by the pineal gland in the brain of mammals. Melatonin is thought to help regulate the natural rhythms of sleep and wakefulness. Travelers use melatonin to reset their internal clock when moving from one time zone to another. Melatonin is widely available in pill form at your local drug store or pharmacy.

Melatonin, along with exercise and a meal beforehand, may encourage your dog to sleep while you are away so that he can match your working hours with his sleeping hours. It does not work with all dogs and you should consult your veterinarian as to the dosage that is acceptable for your dog.

Dedications: Clomincalm And Reconcile

Just as with people, there are an increasing number of drugs that are available to treat psychological problems in dogs. Although many people are reluctant to medicate their dogs, if the alternative is to part company, then it is worth considering. Medication, in conjunction with behavioral modification, can be just the thing your vet recommends. Many modern psychoactive drugs are not sedatives and are not designed to “drug” your dog or make him sleepy or “dopey.”

Clomincalm, from Novartis, the maker of Sentinel and Program flea and parasite treatments, is one medication marketed especially for separation anxiety in dogs. The active ingredient is clomipramine hydrochloride and it comes in tablet form by prescription only. It is used in conjunction with behavior modification.

Clomipramine is a serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SRI) and is used in humans for treating obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). It is similar to medications for humans such as Prozac.

The newest drug treatment on the market is Eli Lilly's Reconcile (see press release). This is the first FDA drug approved specifically to treat separation anxiety in dogs. The active ingredient, fluoxetine hydrochloride, is also the active ingredient in Prozac. It is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) and is marketed as more specific for separation anxiety than Clomincalm.

Reconcile is a prescription-only, once-daily chewable pill

The dosage is based on your dog's weight

The range of responses from great responses to no response will vary with the individual dog

Behavior modification is required in addition to the pill. Eli Lilly provides a behavior modification regimen to go along with **reconcile**.

These drugs may require several weeks to show an effect

The recommended doses may not be sufficient for some dogs

Medications: General Information

Below are links to the Merck Veterinary Manual. The first is a list of drugs that may help in behavioral therapy for dogs when other avenues are ineffective or insufficient. The second link discusses general guidelines for drug use including what background information should be collected and what tests should be done.

Merck Veterinary Manual: Drugs for Canine Behavior

http://www.merckmanuals.com/vet/behavior/behavioral_medicine_introduction/principles_of_pharmacologic_treatment_for_behavioral_problems.html

Merck Veterinary Manual: Guidelines for Behavioral Drug Use

http://www.merckmanuals.com/vet/behavior/behavioral_medicine_introduction/principles_of_pharmacologic_treatment_for_behavioral_problems.html

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