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Separation Anxiety

How do I know if my pet's problem is due to separation anxiety?



Separation anxiety describes dogs that usually are overly attached or dependent on family members. They become extremely anxious and show distress behaviors of vocalization, destruction, house-soiling or inactivity when separated from the owners. Most dogs with separation anxiety try to remain close to their owners and become increasingly anxious the greater the separation. They may follow the owners from room to room and begin to display signs of anxiety as soon as the owners prepare to leave. Some of these dogs crave a great deal of physical contact and attention from their owners and can be demanding. During departures or separations they may begin to salivate or pant profusely, vocalize, eliminate, and refuse to eat, become destructive or become quiet and withdrawn. Most often these behaviors occur within about 20 minutes of the owner's departure. While typically the behavior occurs each and every time the owner leaves, it can only happen on selected departures, such as work-day departures, or when the owner leaves again after coming home from work. Dogs with separation anxiety are also often quite excited and aroused when the owner returns jumping, whining, running around for 5-15 minutes when you first come home.

Are there other reasons that my dog may engage in these behaviors?

Many dogs, especially puppies enjoy chewing and engage in the behavior when they have

nothing better to keep them occupied. House-soiling may be due to medical problems, leaving the dog alone for longer than it can control its bladder, or inadequate house-training. Vocalization may be due to territorial intrusion by strangers or other animals, and can be a rewarded behavior if the dog receives any form of attention when it vocalizes or rewarded by the stimulus leaving. Some dogs will attempt to escape or become extremely anxious when confined, so that destructiveness or house-soiling when a dog is locked up in a crate, basement, or laundry room, may be due to confinement or barrier anxiety and associated attempts at escape. In addition, noise phobias such as a thunderstorm that passes through during the owner's absence, may lead to marked destructiveness, house-soiling, salivation and vocalization. Old dogs with medical problems such as loss of hearing or sight, painful conditions and cognitive dysfunction may become more anxious in general, and seek out the owner's attention for security and relief. While giving attention to help calm your dog may seem to be the best alternative, this may greatly increase your dogs need to be with you and around you at all times.

Where do I start?

Before you can begin to consider departure training, you must focus on developing a routine and training your pet to settle down and relax before it can earn attention. In other words you use the very rewards that your dog is seeking to teach independent behavior and relaxed times away from you. Until you can get your pet to settle and relax without attention when you are at home, your pet is unlikely to settle when you leave.

1. Establish a predictable routine

Since your dog is anxious you need to begin by making his day calmer and more predictable whether you are home or away. Establish a daily routine so that your pet can begin to predict when exercise, attention, feeding, training, play and elimination can be expected and when it is time to settle and nap or play with favored toys. Try to schedule times for object play and naps at times when you would normally depart.

2. Environmental enrichment – meeting your dog's needs

While maintaining a regular routine, the pet's day should be sufficiently enriched to meet or exceed its needs for social play, exercise, training and affection. In effect, you should initiate enough regular interactive sessions and provide enough play toys so that in between your pet is ready to settle down and relax. New exploratory and chew toys should be added in between social play times, so that the pet can focus on its own toys when it is time to settle. Feeding toys can also replace standard food bowls to make feeding time more of a mental and physical effort.

3. Establish a predictable protocol for rewards

If your pet has separation anxiety, it's likely that your pet's favored rewards are the attention and play that you provide. Treats, food, play and chew toys may also be highly desirable to the pet. Take each of the pet's most valuable rewards and ask yourself: "what behavior does my pet need to learn" and "what behavior should I never reinforce". With separation anxiety the answer should be clear; you must reinforce the pet for settling down, relaxing and showing some independence, while attention seeking and following behaviors should never be reinforced. Therefore, training should focus on extended and relaxed down stays and going to a bed or mat on command (see our settle exercises handout). If your dog seeks attention, your options are to ignore entirely until your dog settles, or to have your dog do a down-stay or go to its mat. After sufficient time in the down-stay or on the mat, give some attention or affection as a reward. Gradually shape longer periods of inattention before attention is given. The goal is not to ignore the dog, but rather to ignore attention-seeking behaviors. You want the dog to learn that calm and quiet behavior is desired and the best way to receive attention.

4. Train settle (see settle exercise handout)
The goal of training is that your dog learns to settle comfortably on cue. Focus on having your pet in a settled down, or lying on its bed or mat (or crate) before you give any reward. Not only should attention-seeking behavior be ignored, but all casual interactions should be avoided for the first few weeks, so that it is clear to both you and your dog that a settled response predictably achieves rewards and attention seeking does not. Practice training down stays and mat exercises (see our settle handout) using food lures, clicker training or head halter training, whichever you find most effective. Gradually shape longer stays and longer times on the bed or mat before attention, affection, treats or play is earned.
5. Develop an area and mat for relaxation
Having a bed or mat location (in a room, pen, or crate) where your dog can be taught to rest, nap, play and even sleep, can provide a secure area for your pet when you are not home. You can begin by training your pet to go to the area and gradually shape longer stays and more relaxed responses in the area before rewards are given. It might be helpful to have a barricade, tie down or crate that could be closed to ensure that your dog remains in the area for long enough at each session before being released. On the other hand, know your limits for success; your dog must be calm and settled when released so as to avoid reinforcing crying or barking behavior. At first your dog can be taken to this area as part of training routine using a toy or treat as a lure or a leash and head halter. However, in time a daily routine should be established where the dog learns to lie on its mat after each exercise, play and training session to either nap or play with its own toys. This is similar to the routine for crate training where the mat or bed becomes the dog's bed or playpen. Other than play, exercise and training sessions, focus on giving your dog some or all of its rewards (treats, toys, chews, affection, feeding toys) only in this area. Audible cues such as a radio, CD or TV, odors such as aromatherapy candles or a piece of clothing with the owner's scent, and a comfortable bed, can help to promote a relaxed response since they are associated with relaxation and owner presence (non-departure).
6. For some dogs it also is useful to work on responses to simple commands and having them earn all things. This can be as simple as having the dog respond to a command such as "sit" prior to receiving anything it wants. For example if the dog asks to go outside prior to opening the door the dog is given the command to "sit" and once it complies the door is opened. This technique can be used for anything the dog desires. See our handout on learn to earn for other examples.

When I need to leave, what can I do immediately to prevent damage?



This is an extremely difficult question. The goal of treatment is to reduce your pet's level of anxiety by training it to feel comfortable in your absence. This can be a long intensive process. Yet, most owners will need to deal with the damage or vocalization immediately. During initial retraining it's usually best to hire a dog sitter, take the dog to work, find a friend to care for the dog for the day, board the dog for the day, or arrange to take some time off from work to retrain the dog. Crate training or dog proofing techniques may work especially well for those dogs that already have an area where they are used to being confined. Crates should be used with caution however, with dogs that have separation anxiety and/or barrier frustrations, because they can promote intense escape attempts and may result in fairly serious injuries. It is important to choose a room or area that does not further increase the dog's anxiety. The dog's bedroom or feeding area may therefore be most practical. Booby-traps might also be used to keep the dog away from potential problem areas (See our handouts on 'Behavior management products' and 'Canine punishment').

For vocalization, anti-bark devices may be useful (see our handout on 'Barking'), but the dog will continue to remain anxious, and the motivation to vocalize may be too strong for the products to be effective. Tranquilizers and anti-anxiety drugs and pheromones may also be useful for short-term use, until the owner has effectively corrected the problem.

How can the dog be retrained so that it is less anxious during departures?

Since the underlying problem is anxiety, try to reduce all forms of anxiety, prior to departure, at the time of departure, and at the time of homecoming. In addition, the pet must learn to accept progressively longer periods of inattention and separation while the owners are at home.

What should be done prior to departures?

Before any lengthy departure, provide a vigorous session of play and exercise. This not only helps to reduce some of the dog's energy and tire it out, but also provides a period of attention. A brief training session can also be a productive way to further interact and "work" with your dog. For the final 15-30 minutes prior to departure, the dog should be ignored. It would be best if your dog were trained to go to its rest and relaxation area with a radio, TV, or video playing, (as above) as the owner could then prepare for departure while the pet is out of sight and earshot of the owner. The key is to avoid as many of the departure signals as possible, so that the dog's anxiety doesn't heighten, even before the owner leaves. Brushing teeth, changing into work

clothes, or collecting keys, purse, briefcase or schoolbooks, are all routines that might be able to be performed out of sight of the dog. Owners might also consider changing clothes at work, preparing and packing a lunch the night before, or might even consider leaving their car at a neighbor's so the dog wouldn't hear the car pulling out of the driveway. The other alternative is to expose your dog to as many of these cues as possible while you remain at home so that they no longer are predictive of departure (see below). A few minutes prior to departure the dog should be given some fresh toys and objects to keep it occupied so that the owner can leave while the dog is distracted. Saying goodbye will only serve to bring attention to the departure.

What should I do if I come home to a mess?

Your dog has been extremely anxious during your departure and presumably this has led to any destruction or housesoiling. Therefore, anything you might do to increase your pet's anxiety can only make matters worse for future departures and will not do anything to correct what has already been done.

Therefore both punishment and excited greetings must be avoided. At homecomings, ignore your dog until it calms and settles down (this may take 10-15 minutes). Your dog should soon learn that the faster it settles the sooner it will get your attention.

What can be done to reduce anxiety at the time of departure?



As you depart, your dog should be kept busy and occupied, and preferably out of sight, so that there is little or no anxiety. Giving special food treats that have been saved for departures (and mock departure training sessions) can help keep the dog distracted and perhaps “enjoying itself” while you leave. Dogs that are highly aroused and stimulated by food may become so intently occupied in a peanut butter coated dog toy, a fresh piece of rawhide, a dog toy stuffed with liver and dog food, or some frozen dog treats, that they may not even notice you leave. Be certain that the distraction devices last as long as possible so that the dog continues to occupy its time until you are “long gone”. Frozen treats placed in the dog's food bowl, toys that are tightly stuffed with goodies, toys that are designed to require manipulation and work to obtain the food reward, toys that can maintain lengthy chewing, and timed feeders that open throughout the day are a few suggestions. Determine what best motivates your dog. For example, if a particular toy is highly successful provide two or three of the same type rather than toys that do not maintain your dog's interest. It may also be helpful to provide some or all of the dog's food during departures with a few special surprises in the bottom of the bowl. On rare occasions a second pet can help to keep the dog occupied and distracted during departures. Neither food, nor the second pet is likely to be useful in dogs that are too anxious.

My dog starts to get anxious even before I leave. What can I do?

There are a number of activities that we do consistently prior to each departure. The dog soon learns to identify these cues or signals with imminent departure. On the other hand, some dogs learn that certain other signals mean that the owners are staying home or nearby (inhibiting cues) and therefore can help the dog to relax. If we can prevent the dog from observing any of these anxiety inducing pre-departure cues, or if we train the dog that these cues are no longer predictive of departure, then the anxiety is greatly reduced. Even with the best of efforts some dogs will still pick up on “cues” that the owner is about to depart. Train your pet to associate these cues with enjoyable, relaxing situations (rather than the anxiety of impending departure). By exposing the dog to these cues while you remain at home and when the dog is relaxed or otherwise occupied, they are no longer predictive of departure. This entails some retraining while you are home. You get the items (keys, shoes, briefcase, jacket etc.) that normally signal your departure, and walk to the door. However, you **do not** leave or exit the house just put everything away. The dog will be watching and possibly get up, but once you put every thing away, the dog should lie down. Then, once the dog is calm, this is repeated. However, only 3-4 repetitions should be done in a single training session; it is vital that the dog be calm and settled before the cues are presented again. Eventually, the dog will not attend to these cues (habituate) because they are no longer predictive of you leaving and will not react, get up or look anxious as you go about your pre-departure tasks. Then, the dog will be less anxious when you do leave. This often allows the next step in re-training, planned departures.

What can be done to retrain the dog to reduce the dependence and following?

The most important aspect of retraining is to teach the dog to be independent and relaxed in your presence. Only when you have taught the dog to stay in place in its bed or relaxation area, rather than constantly following you around, will it be possible to train the dog to begin to accept actual (or mock) departures.



Attention-getting behaviors must not pay off. Any attempts at attention must be ignored. On the other hand, lying quietly away from you should be rewarded. Teach your dog that it is the quiet behavior that will receive attention, and not following you around, or demanding attention. Teach your dog to relax in its quiet area and to accept lengthy periods of inattention when you are home. You may have to begin with very short periods of inattention and gradually shape this to 30 minute periods or longer. Training can progress much quicker if you teach the down stay and go to your mat command so that you “tell” your dog what is the desired behavior (see our settle exercises handout). Be sure to schedule attention, interaction and play sessions that you initiate and develop a routine while you are at home that incorporates play and attention sessions followed by sessions of inattention (for napping or playing with toys). Your dog should get use to this routine so that you can depart while the dog is calm.

How can I teach my dog to accept my departures?

Formal retraining should be directed at teaching your dog to remain on its mat, in its bed, or in its crate or den area, for progressively longer periods of time (30 minutes or more). You may need to begin with food lure exercises, starting with a down-stay and gradually increasing the time and the level of relaxation at each session. Once the pet will stay in your presence, begin to walk away and return beginning with just a few feet for a few seconds and progressing over time to leaving the room for 30 minutes or longer. Reward with a play or attention session, perhaps coming back and giving a gentle massage or tummy rub. In this way the desired behavior is being shaped and reinforced with the very attention that the dog craves. Remember however, that attention at other times, especially on demand, encourages the dog to follow and pester rather than stay in its bed and relax. A head halter can be particularly useful throughout this training to insure that the pet remains in position and immediately responds to the command.

From this point on, your dog should be encouraged to stay in its bed or crate for extended periods of time rather than sitting at your feet or on your lap. If your dog can also be taught to sleep in this relaxation area at night rather than on your bed or in your bedroom, this may help to break the over-attachment and dependence more quickly. During these training exercises use as many cues as possible to help relax the dog. Mimic the secure environment that the dog feels when the owner is at home. Leave the TV on. Play a favorite video or CD. Leave a favorite blanket or chew toy in the area. All of these cues may help to calm the dog.

How do I progress to leaving the house?

Finally, practice short "mock" departures. During "mock" or graduated departure training, the dog should be exercised, given a short formal training session, and taken to its bed or mat to relax. Give the 'down-stay' command, a few toys and treats and leave. The first few "mock" departures should be identical to the training exercises above, but instead of leaving the room for a few minutes while the dog is calm and distracted, you will begin to leave the home. The first few departures should be just long enough to leave and return without any signs of anxiety or destructiveness. This might last from a few seconds to a couple of minutes; however, the hardest part and most critical part may be to merely get out the door without the dog becoming anxious. Gradually but randomly increase the time. As the time of departure approaches 10 or 15 minutes, begin to include other activities associated with departure such as opening and closing the car door and returning, turning on and off the car engine and returning or pulling the car out of the driveway and returning.

How come my dog gets so anxious when I leave home, but is just fine when I leave the car?

Many dogs that destroy the home when left alone will stay in a car or van without becoming anxious or destructive. This is because the dog has learned to relax and enjoy the car rides, without the need for constant physical attention and contact. And, when the owner does leave this relaxed dog in the car, the departures are generally quite short. The owner may occasionally leave the dog in the car during longer absences. The owner has trained the dog using inattention, relaxation and a graduated departure technique. The dog has learned that when he is in the car, the owner returns quickly and he can be good and not be anxious. What is very important is to progress slowly through the series of departures. If when you return, the dog is anxious or extremely excited, then the departure was too long and the next one should be shorter. This is an effective technique, but very slow in the beginning. The goal is to teach the dog "my owner is only going to be gone for a short time; they are coming right back; I can be good."

Is drug therapy useful?

Drug therapy can be useful especially during initial departure training. Tranquilizers alone do not reduce the pet's anxiety and may only be helpful to sedate your dog so that it is less likely to investigate and destroy. Often the most suitable drugs for long-term use are anti-depressants, anti-anxiety drugs or a combination. Drugs alone will do little or nothing to improve separation anxiety. It is the retraining program that is needed to help your dog gain some independence and accept some time away from you. Pheromone therapy can also be useful for diminishing anxiety both while you are home and when you are away.

FOR MORE INFO VISIT:

www.lillypet.com (Reconcile -> FDA approved drug for Separation Anxiety)

www.ah.novartis.com (Clomicalm -> FDA approved drug for Separation Anxiety)

www.ceva.com (Phermone products for in-home use to reduce anxiety)

www.dogwise.com Great site for behavior toys

ADDITIONAL INSTRUCTIONS: