

## DOG TRAINING

# How to Stop Separation Anxiety in Dogs?

The term “separation anxiety” is often misunderstood. True clinical separation anxiety is not common.

### ***What is Separation Anxiety?***

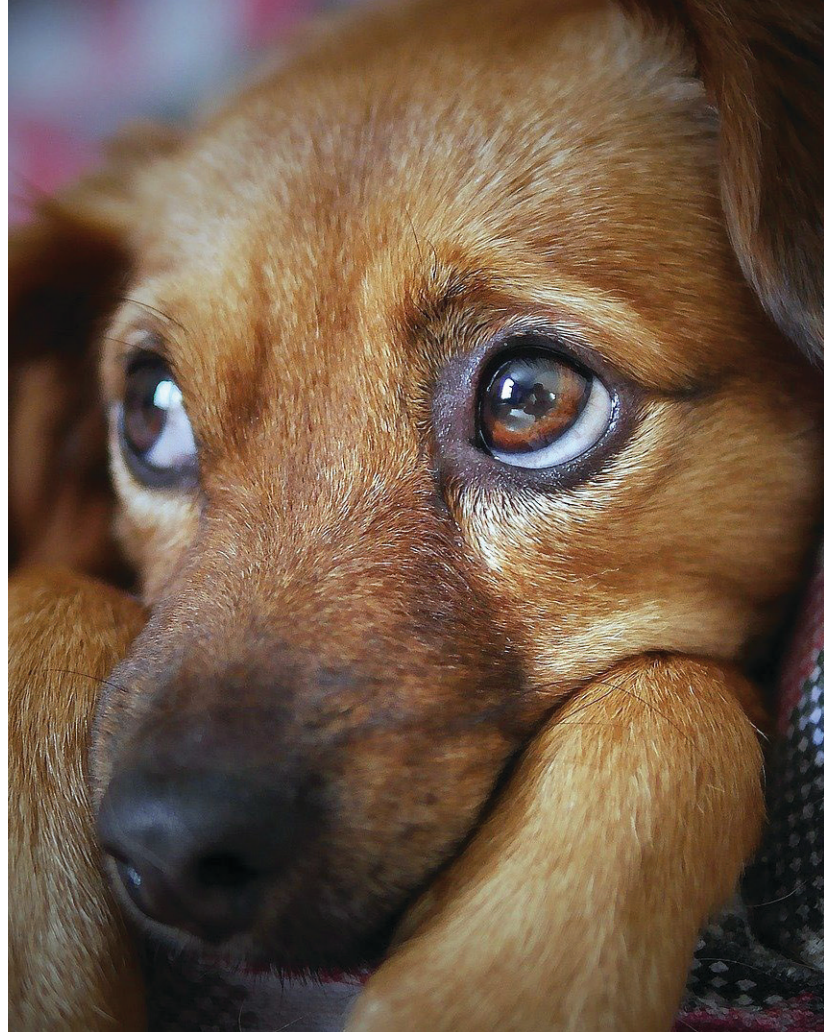
Separation anxiety in dogs is the fear or dislike of isolation, which often results in undesirable behavior. Separation anxiety is one of the most common causes of canine behavioral problems.

If your dog follows you around room to room, becomes anxious even if a closed door separates you, dislikes spending time alone outdoors, and acts depressed or anxious when you are getting ready to leave the house then your dog may have minor separation anxiety.

If, however, you are having destruction of property (especially around doors or windows), howling and barking, urination and defecation then it is probably severe separation anxiety. Prescribed drugs are sometimes used as a temporary measure along with the behavior modification program. Severe cases require a behavior modification program and desensitization to being alone.

When left alone, most dogs find a familiar spot and go to sleep. However, a dog suffering from separation anxiety will become extremely anxious. Separation anxiety occurs when a dog becomes distressed over the absence of other pack members, human or canine. He does not understand where you or your family has gone or if you will ever return. Your dog’s way of expressing anxiety over your absence may include chewing, barking, salivating, urinating, defecating, vomiting, self-mutilation or escape behavior such as chewing through walls, scratching through doors, busting out of cages or digging under fences (if left outdoors). In some cases, the dog simply gets sick, perhaps due to some form of depression.

Often it is the exits and entrances to the home that the dog targets for destruction. The destruction is not an attempt to seek revenge on the owner for leaving but is a panic response. It can be compared to humans suffering from panic attacks, so even if the physical signs are not obvious, the psychological stress can be severe. To help your dog overcome this normal response we need to progress gradually and slowly to minimize the stress. Your goal is to help your dog accept separation without stressing in the first place and to remain calm during prolonged separation.



## **What can cause Separation Anxiety?**

Dogs need to be properly conditioned to being left alone. Separation anxiety can sometimes happen when:

- the dog has never or rarely been left alone
- after going away to a boarding kennel or shelter
- after a change in the family's routine such as a new work schedule, moving to a new home, a new person living in the home or a person leaving the home
- after a long interval such as a vacation with you and your dog being constantly together

Giving a dog too much or the wrong type of attention can lead to such stress related behaviors. In some cases, the constant attention and petting a dog receives when its owners are home make the stress worse when they are absent.

- petting the dog too much for merely existing
- allowing the dog to sleep in bed before behavior issues are resolved
- petting and playing with the dog when they demand it
- petting to calm the dog down when he is scared, stressed, angry, etc.
- excitable greeting of the dog upon awakening or arriving home

These actions can make the dog too dependent and create neediness. This neediness cannot be fulfilled when the dog is alone. If the dog is experiencing stress when left alone, he will do things that he should not do. It is important to keep a balance, so that the dog does not feel as alone when you are gone.

## **Treating Separation Anxiety**

Treatment for separation anxiety varies from dog to dog. Here are some things you can do to assist in the modification of this behavior or the prevention of it.

### **1. Crate your dog**

Crating your dog during your times of absence has two positive results. First, a dog who is confined to a carrier or crate cannot do damage to your home. Secondly, when properly introduced, a crate will act as a safe, comfortable den where the dog can relax. Limiting his movement also acts as an anxiety reducer for most dogs.

Some dogs prefer to be in a room next to a window and some do not. Some dogs feel safer in a plastic walled crate and some prefer a wire crate. Find out what works best for your dog.

### **2. Turn on a radio or television**

Turn on a radio or television in a room you are often in, the bedroom is usually a good choice, and close the door. The dog will hear the human voices from your room and may not feel so alone. Stick to an easy listening station so as not to excite the dog or use the animal planet channel. It will buffer outside noises and make the house seem less empty. Also leave a light on if it will be getting dark.

### **3. Treat with a Kong toy**

*...the fear or dislike of isolation, which often results in undesirable behavior and one of the most common causes of canine behavioral problems.*



Get a “kong” and fill it with goodies such as dried liver pet treats, beef jerky, peanut butter, cheese or other things your dog really likes. Keep it hidden and take it out when you leave each day. When you arrive home put the kong away.

#### 4. Change your exit pattern

With most dogs, the hardest time for them is immediately after you leave. Their anxious (and sometimes destructive) behavior occurs within the first hour after they are left alone. Maintain a calm presence around the dog the last 30 minutes before you leave the house so as not to excite the dog and possibly induce stress. Leave the dog out of the crate, put your coat on, and walk to the door and leave. Come back in immediately. Greet the dog calmly. Tell the dog to sit. When the dog sits, reinforce this behavior with praise or a treat the dog enjoys. Wait a few minutes and then repeat the exercise, this time remaining outside a few seconds longer. Continue practicing leaving and returning over the next few weeks. Always remember when returning to greet your dog calmly and command the dog to sit before offering a treat. Also, do your pre-departure activities without leaving. Do anything but leave the house and do this randomly and continue whenever you can. Your dog should begin to learn that coats or keys mean nothing at all.

#### 5. When it is time to leave--just leave

Do not say “good bye” to the dog with hugs and kisses. In fact, ignore the dog for five minutes before you go. Paying too much attention will make the dog feel more insecure when the attention is abruptly withdrawn.

#### 6. Obedience training

Obedience helps to structure the dog’s life. Practice a minimum of 15 minutes a day strictly on obedience and enforce any command you give the dog, so the dog’s world remains black and white. This way the dog will know his boundaries.

Whether the dog has minor or severe separation anxiety, one of the most effective tools in your toolbox is the PLACE command. This command teaches dogs self-control which an anxious dog needs to learn.

It is important to remember that the dog is not bad or trying to make life miserable-although it sometimes may feel that way! The dog is the victim of a disorder that can be treated.

Don’t give up. Patience and consistency will either correct or improve the situation.

