



STARTING OFF ON THE RIGHT PAW – DVGRR TIPS FOR ADOPTERS

Understanding and Managing Canine Separation Anxiety

In today's busy world, with a high percentage of pet owners working full time out of necessity or choice, many dogs spend much of their day home alone. They may have the companionship of another canine, but often the humans in the household leave in the morning and return six to ten hours later. Many dogs cope effectively with this daily solitude; others do not. In the case of separation anxiety – generally defined as a condition where the dog becomes exceptionally distraught when separated from a specific person and/or left by himself – “home alone” can prove exceptionally stressful for both dog and owner.

Although the causes of this condition are not well understood, many behavior professionals believe there is a fairly strong correlation between separation anxiety and dogs adopted from shelters and rescues. Dogs who have gone through the trauma of rehoming appear more susceptible to developing moderate to severe anxiety issues when left alone. In some cases, the dog's problematic behavior when alone becomes the trigger for their surrender to a shelter, resulting in a difficult search for a new and better suited home.

Other potential precursors to separation anxiety include sudden changes in an owner's schedule (such as a return to work by a formerly stay-at-home owner), a reaction to short term feelings of abandonment (such as being boarded while an owner is away), the death or loss of another dog in the family, or experiencing an especially frightening incident while the dog is home by itself. Of course, the majority of dogs deal with these kinds of changes or experiences successfully, so no doubt other factors, such as genetics or underlying personality characteristics, come into play as well.

It is sometimes tempting to attribute motives such as spite, revenge, or jealousy on the part of the dog as leading to separation anxiety. However, these are generally emotions projected onto the dog by us humans, and are unrelated to this condition.

WHAT DOES SEPARATION ANXIETY LOOK LIKE?

A dog with separation anxiety typically displays some combination of the following behaviors:

- Following the owner from room to room as the owner prepares to leave
- Pacing, panting, drooling, or whining prior to the owner's actual departure
- High stress or panic during the owner's absence, primarily manifesting in excessive barking/howling, house soiling, and destructive behavior (often focused on doors and windows)
- Self-destructive or obsessive-compulsive behaviors such as chewing or licking at paws or flank-sucking
- Hyperactivity (or the opposite, depression and listlessness)

- In severe cases, attempts to escape the house, sometimes by breaking through windows
- Extreme, out-of-proportion excitement and frenzy upon the owner's return home

In most cases, the stress-related behaviors such as destructiveness typically occur within a short time (thirty minutes or so) after the owner leaves. Dogs with separation anxiety also tend to be very "clingy" while their owners are home and need/want to be physically near them as much as possible.

It is important to note that severe cases of separation anxiety (i.e., those involving excessive panic, destructive behavior, and escape attempts) are not seen frequently. Most dogs with this condition exhibit less extreme behaviors and in nearly all cases, improvement is possible.

IS IT TRULY SEPARATION ANXIETY?

The term "separation anxiety" is often used freely by pet owners and professionals, yet in some cases the dog's problem behavior stems from other sources.

One important distinction has to do with whether the dog is reacting to being completely alone, or just being away from a person to whom he is especially bonded. The term "isolation distress" is sometimes used to differentiate these two scenarios.

According to noted trainer and behavior consultant [Pat Miller](#), *"Isolation distress means the dog doesn't want to be left alone – any ol' human will do for company, and sometimes even another dog will fill the bill. True separation distress or anxiety means the dog is hyper-bonded to one specific person, and continues to show stress behaviors if that person is absent, even if other humans or dogs are present."*

In addition, some behaviors that characterize a dog with separation anxiety may in reality have little to do with anxiety. For example, destructive behavior may result simply from boredom or restlessness, especially on the part of a young dog with inadequate exercise and stimulation. Nicole Wilde, author of [Don't Leave Me! Step-by-Step Help for Your Dog's Separation Anxiety](#), notes that while some dogs are sad when their owners leave, others may be thinking, "Whoohoo! They're finally gone! Par-tee!" You may come home to torn up cushions or chewed up papers, but don't assume your dog was anxious...he or she may just like to chew or need a more appropriate outlet for pent-up energy.

Similarly, inappropriate elimination in the house could be due to a medical issue, lack of complete housetraining, or inability to "hold it" for long periods without opportunity to go outside.

Excessive barking or other vocalization is characteristic of separation anxiety, but can also result from a dog being agitated by unusual activities or noises outside, or acting territorial if another dog or person walks past the house.

The "gold standard" for identifying separation anxiety is that the behaviors *only* occur when the owner is gone, and that they occur *every* time the dog is left alone.

USING VIDEO TO DIAGNOSE

To determine if your dog's behavior actually stems from separation anxiety (versus boredom or some other more treatable issue), you really have to observe him while he's alone in your house. You might be

able to peek in through a window, but given our dogs' exquisite sense of smell and hearing, it's likely you'll be discovered fairly soon.

The better answer is using videotape to capture the true nature of what happens when you leave. You can purchase a small unobtrusive video recorder or a webcam and set it up to record your dog's behavior and actions while alone. This will help you determine at what point the behavior occurs (remember, true separation anxiety typically manifest soon after you leave) and what seems to trigger it. You may find that something unexpected is leading to the "evidence" seen on your return. [Suzanne Hetts](#), a leading behavior consultant, describes a case in which two dogs were continually wrestling with each other during the day, leading to overturned furniture and other household damage that the owners initially attributed to anxious or panicky behavior. A videotape made of their activities in the absence of the owner revealed the true issue – nonstop roughhousing.

TREATMENT AND SOLUTIONS

As with most behavior challenges, dogs with separation anxiety fall along a continuum of severity, from mild cases to very extreme cases. Especially for the more severe cases, this condition is a difficult and often frustrating one to manage and treat – *though improvement is most certainly possible*. Working through a canine separation anxiety problem requires a high degree of commitment and patience on the part of the dog's owner. It may also require working jointly with a behavior specialist or veterinary behaviorist, so be sure you are also prepared for the financial commitment that may entail.

Here are some of the typically recommended methods for helping a dog learn to cope better with being alone:

Minimize the amount of time the dog is left alone. A dog with this problem is obviously best suited to a household where the human family members are not gone for long periods of time. Retired individuals, stay-at-home parents, or people with home-based businesses are often good choices. Of course, no one is typically home 24 hours a day, every day, so other types of assistance will also be needed.

Other options to avoid "alone time" are taking the dog with you (as long as that is feasible and safe), utilizing the services of a doggie daycare program, or arranging to have someone stay in your home while you are gone. Again, these are good potential solutions but unlikely to take care of every scenario where the dog may be left alone.

Don't scold or punish the dog for anxiety-related behavior. If you come home to yet another clawed up door frame or chewed up rug, it may be hard to keep your cool! Still, scolding your dog for such transgressions will not help and in fact it is likely to make things worse going forward. Dogs with separation anxiety are essentially experiencing the equivalent of a panic attack in a person – in the throes of such anxiety, they are unable to exercise self-control over their behavior.

Avoid crates for confining the dog. It's tempting to consider leaving the dog in a crate when you go out – after all, if confined to a crate the dog cannot damage the house by chewing, digging, or scratching. Unfortunately, the vast majority of dogs with separation anxiety just panic MORE when left in a crate and their frantic efforts to get out often lead to extreme distress and/or injuries. You may be able to

keep the dog confined to one room or area of the home with gates or other barriers, but please do not use a crate.

Keep your departures and arrivals low key. Leaving and returning home should be as calm and unemotional as possible. Sometimes using the same phrase when you leave, such as “I’ll be back” or “See you later”, can be helpful. Be sure not to hug or kiss the dog, talk to them soothingly for any length of time, or otherwise make a big deal out of leaving. *What you’re trying to do is decrease the contrast between your presence and your absence.* Same thing when you come home – be very low key and calm for the first 10-15 minutes or so. If necessary, don’t even greet your dog or interact with him until he has a chance to settle down. Your coming home should be as much of a “non-event” as possible.

Some experts recommend leaving an item of clothing with your scent on it when you go out – this can be comforting to the dog. You can also use stuffed Kongs or other interactive toys, both as a distraction and a way for the dog to associate something good happening when you leave. To do this, only give the dog his special Kong treat or other toy when you leave the house – he doesn’t get them when you are home. If this technique works properly, the dog should actually start to look forward to your leaving because it signals something extra yummy or exciting coming his way. You are more likely to have success with this in mild cases of separation anxiety, i.e., with dogs that can tolerate at least short periods of being alone. Be careful that the technique does not backfire on you, leading the dog to see the Kong or special toy as an anxiety trigger because it signifies your leaving.

Build your dog’s confidence through leadership, training and fun activities. This is not a “treatment” for separation anxiety in and of itself, but clearly dogs with this condition tend to be insecure and nervous in general. Anything you can do as part of your daily routine or special activities that can help increase your dog’s confidence level may have an indirect influence on his ability to tolerate being alone. Demonstrate good leadership so your dog feels more secure, take him through a positive, rewards-based training class (or two), get him started in agility or rally obedience just for fun. And, make sure your dog gets enough exercise! Tiring him out before you leave for work or other reason is, again, not a panacea, but it certainly may help reduce his anxiety level.

Try using a natural stress-reducing remedy or body wrap. The pet marketplace is full of products designed to induce a state of calmness in dogs undergoing one kind of stress or another. Finding out which one may have some effect on your dog is largely a matter of trial and error (plus getting input from other pet owners who’ve tried them as well). Some options to consider:

- Pheromone diffusers such as [D.A.P.](#) (Dog Appeasing Pheromone) or [Comfort Zone](#)
- Calming music such as [Through a Dog’s Ear](#), [Pet Pause](#), or Pet Acoustics
- [Ultra-Calm](#) – Dr. Foster and Smith brand
- [Calm Shen](#) – Chinese herb remedy
- [Rescue Remedy](#) – Flower Essence product
- [OptiBalance Fears and Phobias Formula](#) – Flower Essence product
- [Mellow Out](#)
- [Calming Collar](#) – worn around the dog’s neck, filled with soothing herbs

Note: Please remember to discuss anything administered orally to your dog with your veterinarian, to be sure it is not contraindicated with anything healthwise affecting your dog.

Body wraps (like the [Thundershirt](#) or [Anxiety Wrap](#)) are designed to reduce stress by providing gentle, comforting pressure around your dog's body. They are primarily used for dogs with thunderstorm anxiety but are applicable to other stressful situations as well. They work well for some dogs; not at all for others.

How about a second dog?

You may have friends or other well-meaning people recommend that you get a second dog as a companion for your anxiety-ridden pooch – the theory obviously being that with another dog in the home, the dog is not completely alone and will be less stressed. It's possible this will help, but there are certainly no guarantees. For some dogs, a canine buddy makes no difference in their reaction to the owners leaving; others do take some comfort in the other dog's presence.

If you have a friend with a dog that your own dog gets along with, you can try leaving them together as an experiment to see if that improves your dog's reaction to being home alone. Be sure the two dogs are well acquainted and very compatible before leaving them alone together, and do so only for short periods in the beginning.

Bottom line: *Getting a second dog should be something you do because you really want a second dog, not because you think it will help your current dog.* Even if your dog does well in your "experiment" with a friend's dog, it doesn't mean he'll feel the same about a new canine brother or sister. Be sure your commitment to the second dog is appropriate before going that route.

Behavior modification

For many cases of true, difficult-to-manage separation anxiety, some degree of behavior modification is essential. Implementing a behavior modification treatment plan should ideally be done in conjunction with an experienced dog trainer or behavior counselor, as it is important to approach the problem systematically and with careful thought given to the steps involved. A knowledgeable pet professional can also help to provide moral support, encouragement, and problem-solving along the way, as the process can require a great deal of patience and commitment in extreme cases.

A pet owner can potentially implement a program on his or her own, however, using some of the resources listed in this article. For example, this [article](#) from the ASPCA has a fairly detailed description of the steps to take in helping a dog learn to relax when left alone. Still, the best results are likely to come from working together with a professional.

Treating a dog with separation anxiety typically involves some degree of "counter-conditioning and desensitization," most often combined with the administration of anti-anxiety medication (see next section). One without the other is much less likely to lead to a successful outcome.

Basically defined, **counter-conditioning** is the process of changing a dog's emotional response to a stimulus or trigger from one of anxiety or fear to one of pleasant association. **Desensitization** involves gradually exposing a dog to something he is afraid of, starting with a less intense version of the object or experience, in order to ultimately decrease or eliminate the fear. You can read more about these two behavior modification approaches [here](#).

In the case of separation anxiety, these two techniques are implemented by leaving the dog alone for very small increments at a time to help him learn that nothing bad will happen to him, or, even better, that something good will happen (a favorite treat, a new chew toy, a special game, etc.). In some cases, the amount of time can be as short as thirty seconds or a minute at first – it's important not to let the dog experience the extreme anxiety he has become accustomed to with longer periods of alone time.

Writing in [*Don't Leave Me! Step-by-Step Help for Your Dog's Separation Anxiety*](#), Nicole Wilde talks about planning your departures “a little at a time so the dog feels fine.” At first, you will need to use what she calls a “faux go,” meaning that you are not really leaving to go to work or elsewhere; you are simply going out the door and coming back in again after just a short time, building (very slowly!) to longer periods of time.

A tip offered by some professionals is to first (or jointly) teach your dog that while both of you are in the house together, he or she does not need to be in close proximity to you all the time. Dogs who constantly want/need their owners right by their side obviously have a harder time adjusting to the owner leaving the home. If they can learn that it's ok to be across the room, in a different room, or downstairs when the owner is upstairs, it will help them gain the confidence and comfort to stay completely by themselves. Again, this should be done very slowly and carefully, however, so patience and time are key ingredients for success.

A great application of desensitization involves teaching your dog to react less intensely to your “departure cues” – you know, all the things you routinely do that signal you are getting ready to leave. Departure cues include things like eating breakfast, packing a lunch, gathering your work materials, picking up your keys, putting on your coat, etc. To help those activities trigger less anxiety in your dog, you start doing them at different points during the day, not just when you are actually going to leave. For example, you put on your coat but don't walk to the door – just sit down in a chair and read the paper. Or, pick up your keys and just walk around with them in your pocket for a while instead of using them to lock the door as you depart. The idea is that your dog learns not to immediately become anxious or afraid each time he sees one of these cues taking place – he's become desensitized to their original meaning.

While a behavior modification plan is underway, it's important not to let your dog “practice” the anxious behavior that comes with being left alone for longer than he can emotionally handle. Otherwise, you risk undoing all the good work you are putting in place to teach a more acceptable and less fearful reaction. Think of working with a child who is afraid of going into a swimming pool. You spend two days helping the child go in the water up to his toes, then his ankles, then his knees. He's gradually getting more comfortable with the shallow end of the pool and letting the water touch his lower legs only. Then the next day you throw him into the deep end and let him flail around up to his neck for a few hours. Clearly, all your foundation work from the two days before will be lost. It's the same idea as working on short, planned departures with your dog over the weekend, then leaving him alone all day on Monday.

Anti-anxiety medication

Many dog owners avoid the use of medication, feeling that there is some stigma attached to using meds for a behavior problem. While drugs should not be seen as a panacea or the only means of addressing a

problem, they can be extremely effective when used in conjunction with behavior modification and/or other treatment techniques for separation anxiety. After all, if your dog is so stressed out that he can't even focus on what's going on around him, he's unlikely to respond to any kind of training or methods used to desensitize him. Additionally, for dogs whose issues are so severe that they are at risk of injury (e.g., breaking through windows, bloodying their paws from incessant door clawing, etc.), meds can actually protect the dog's physical as well as emotional well-being.

Medication must be prescribed by a veterinarian, so you will need to work with your primary veterinarian, a veterinary behaviorist, or a behavior counselor who can work jointly with your vet to identify the appropriate medication and dosage.

Good luck! The more extreme cases of separation anxiety *are* challenging, but think how great you'll feel if you can successfully turn your dog's alone time into contentment time.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Books

[*Don't Leave Me! Step-by-Step Help for Your Dog's Separation Anxiety*](#). Nicole Wilde, Phantom Publishing, 2010.

[*I'll Be Home Soon*](#). Patricia McConnell, McConnell Publishing, 2000.

Websites

[Separation Anxiety](#) – Humane Society of the United States

[Separation Anxiety in Dogs](#) – Best Friends Animal Society

[Virtual Pet Behaviorist on Separation Anxiety](#) – ASPCA

[Canine Separation Anxiety](#) – Pat Miller in *Whole Dog Journal*

[Separation Anxiety in Dogs](#) – Jolanta Benal, Quick and Dirty Tips

Webinars/videos

[Separation Anxiety in Dogs](#) – Melissa Bain for APDT National Train Your Dog Month

[Separation Anxiety](#) – Victoria Stillwell for *It's Me or the Dog*