

Why Do so Many Owners Misunderstand Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety is like a panic attack in humans - a feeling of very real terror that's outside your dog's control. A condition not to be confused with simple doggy boredom or overzealous devotion, separation anxiety can be made worse when owners make this common mistake.

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Dec 16, 2022 • 9 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- These days, the condition known as separation anxiety is a serious and all-too-common problem for many dogs
- There are several common symptoms of separation anxiety; it's important for pet parents to realize that dogs with the condition aren't "acting out" — they have no control over their panic or behavior when left alone
- Veterinary scientists haven't yet determined a defined cause for canine separation anxiety; in most cases, it's likely a combination of nature (genetics) and nurture (environment)
- Behavior modification, instituted as early as possible, is very important for dogs with separation anxiety and typically includes reducing attention-seeking behaviors, and desensitization to departure cues
- It's also important to offer natural calming remedies to dogs living with the stress of separation anxiety

Sadly, separation anxiety is an extremely common and serious problem for many dogs today and the humans who love them. Many dog parents confuse some of the milder symptoms of separation anxiety with gestures of canine devotion, but a dog who at first seems just a bit overeager to see you can develop separation anxiety under the right circumstances.

In fact, before your dog has her first full-blown anxiety episode, it's easy to mistake her panting, pawing greeting every time you walk through the door (even if you've only stepped outside to get the mail) as nothing more than the unconditional love of a dog for her owner.

Another mistake people often make is to assume the destructive activity their dogs engage in during an episode of separation anxiety is misbehavior. The misguided belief is that the bored, grumpy dog is exacting revenge on her owner for being left behind.

All that to say, it's important to address your dog's heightened stress when you see it occurring. Waiting until she has full-blown anxiety means that while you can learn to manage the situation, you may not cure it.

Signs Your Dog's Separation Anxiety Is the Real Deal

If your dog suffers from true separation anxiety, when left alone, she experiences panic attacks similar to the ones humans have. It's not just that she misses you and will feel better once you're back. Real separation anxiety is a condition over which she has no control. Common behaviors in a dog with separation anxiety include:

- A need to be in the same room you're in, within a few feet of you
- Frenzied greetings, whether you've been out of her sight 5 minutes or 5 hours
- A noticeable mood change when she senses you're preparing to leave the house
- Doing things while you're gone that she doesn't do in your presence

When left at home alone, a dog with separation anxiety will often engage in at least one and often several of the following behaviors:

- **Vocalizing** — This is typically barking, whining, or howling that starts before you leave or soon after, and continues for most of the time you are away. Chances are your neighbors already have or will soon let you know there's a problem.
- **Drooling** — Excessive salivation is considered by experts to be a red flag for separation anxiety when the excess drool only occurs when a dog is alone or believes she's alone.
- **Accidents in the house** — Your dog has pee and/or poop accidents in random locations around your house rather than in one consistent spot, and this only happens when she's alone or believes she's alone.
- **Destructive behavior** — Dogs with separation anxiety typically cause damage to doors or windows (exit points), or personal items such as clothing, pillows, or the TV remote control. Confining these dogs to a kennel or carrier often causes an escalation of the behavior and can result in self-injury.

It's very important to realize your dog's destructive, out-of-control behavior when she's suffering a separation anxiety episode isn't intentional — it's the result of the very real terror she's feeling. Unfortunately, many dog parents see only the result of their pet's panic when they get home, or hear from an angry neighbor complaining the dog has been howling for hours.

What Separation Anxiety Is Not

If the only mischief your dog gets into while you're away is chewing up a sock or pulling a few pieces of paper from the trash, chances are he's not anxious. He's probably just bored or doing what dogs naturally do — exploring the world with their noses and mouths.

It's easy to distinguish a case of true separation anxiety from simple doggy boredom. The behaviors that result from separation anxiety happen only when you're not around and every time you're not around. It's also likely your dog has learned your routine when you're preparing to leave the house and shows signs of anxiety before you go.

Be aware that some conditions, for example hypothyroidism and hormone imbalances from early spay/neuter,¹ can cause behavioral symptoms similar in nature to the symptoms of separation anxiety, so if you're not sure what you're dealing with, make an appointment with your dog's veterinarian to discuss your concerns.

If your dog has separation anxiety, it's important to understand the very real fear that grips him and triggers the destructive behavior. Helping him overcome the disorder will involve dealing with his anxiety, first — not the behavior it provokes. The sooner you address the anxiety the better long term success you'll have in managing the behavior.

Causes of Separation Anxiety

No definitive explanation exists for why some dogs develop separation anxiety and others don't. Some breeds may be genetically predisposed to the condition; however, nurture seems to play a bigger role than nature. Early socialization and a puppy's experiences before 6 months of age certainly play a role.

I have had many owners tell me they are going to get a puppy when they have a long vacation, so they can spend every minute with the new addition. I believe this is often how the disorder begins. Humans are in constant contact with the puppy 24/7, setting the precedent that this is how life is going to be in the young dog's developing mind.

Many people still don't crate train and work in healthy "alone time" during a puppy's emotional developmental period, resulting in an adolescent that, when left alone for the first time, has a meltdown.

Cherished family pets who wind up at a shelter due to the death or illness of an owner can become panicked when they're left alone at home by their new family. Significant changes in a dog's routine, like a move or the loss of a family member or other pet also have the potential to trigger anxiety disorders in some dogs.

Natural disasters like tornadoes, earthquakes or floods, during which pets get separated from their people are also precipitating events for separation anxiety in some dogs. My dog, Isabelle, was chained to a tree for many years before I adopted her.

As a consequence, every time it rained she would have a stress response, inside the house. Thankfully I was able to address it immediately and prevent her from becoming destructive and having her stress escalate to an all-out panic attack.

Behavior Modification for Dogs With Separation Anxiety

The goal in treating your dog's separation anxiety is to reduce her dependence on you so that she can feel safe when you're away from home. Dogs need to feel secure whether or not you're with them. Helping your furry family member feel more independent can be accomplished with a variety of behavior modification techniques and other strategies.

1. Reducing your dog's attention-seeking behaviors — Don't respond in any manner to her attempts to get your attention by barking, whining, jumping up, or pawing. Don't look at, talk to, or touch your dog when she's engaging in attention-seeking behaviors. Expect the behaviors to get worse initially.

This sounds harsh, but it's also important to ignore your dog for 30 minutes before leaving home. Holding yourself to that half-hour window will prevent you from inadvertently reinforcing her anxious behavior as you're preparing to leave.

A few minutes before you walk out the door, give her a toy stuffed with food or treats to distract her from your actual departure. Don't make a big deal as you're leaving. I recommend slipping out while she's distracted with her toy.

Play classical music while you're away. Open the blinds so natural light comes in and your pet can see outside. Hide stuffed treat-release toys around the house for her to find throughout the day, and consider having a dog walker come break up the monotony if you'll be gone more than 8 hours.

When you arrive home, ignore your dog until she's relaxed. Don't interact with or acknowledge her until she's no longer in a welcome-home frenzy. Again, it sounds harsh, but by you engaging in wound-up crazy dog behavior you're rewarding it.

Don't yell at or use physical punishment with your dog if you arrive home to destruction or a mess on the floor. It's very important to remember that these are not signs of misbehavior, but clinical anxiety, and your dog isn't in control when she's doing them. Punishing her, especially after the fact, will only increase her anxiety level.

2. Desensitizing your dog to your departure — Make a list of activities you perform before leaving home that signal to your dog that your departure is imminent and trigger his anxiety as the time draws near (collecting your keys, coat, purse, etc.). Then perform this activity sequence at times when you aren't leaving the house to disassociate the activities with your impending departure.

When you're spending time at home, teach your dog to be calm and relaxed during "separations" when you're in one room and he's in another. First, move a short distance from him (while you're in the same room) and then return and reward him with a treat.

Repeat this step at the same distance until you're sure your dog is very relaxed, and then gradually increase the distance until you're almost out of the room, making sure to give praise and treats when he stays relaxed and in place.

Once you've increased the distance until you're out of his sight, you can begin to gradually increase the time he's in one room and you're in another. If the minute you're out of sight your dog comes running, he needs more time to work up to that level of separation.

Be aware this can be a long, sometimes tedious process, but it's often very effective. From start to finish can take 8 weeks, sometimes much longer. If you don't feel your dog is making good progress or you feel you need guidance, I recommend you talk with your veterinarian, a positive dog trainer, or a **specialist in canine behavior**.

All-Natural Anxiety Management Tools

With any stressed dog, it's a good idea to have some natural remedies in your toolbox to help minimize anxiety:

- Treat-release toys are a big hit with most dogs. There are chewing-type toys that can be filled with moist food. As she chews, the food is gradually released. You can even fill one up and put it in the freezer, which is especially useful for keeping a dog occupied for a longer period. Lick mats, loaded with kefir or bone broth, then frozen, also offer enjoyable distraction for most pups.
- Engage your dog in a rigorous exercise session daily, preferably before you leave. I can't stress enough how beneficial intense exercise is for anxiety. Also consider enrolling in a nose work class, which is a great way to help your dog build confidence. Go for a walk before you leave and let your dog sniff; sniffing helps promote happy hormones.

- Invest in a pheromone diffuser, such as the Adaptil diffuser for dogs. Species-specific pheromones are chemical substances that can positively affect an animal's emotional state and behavior.
- Consult an integrative or holistic veterinarian about homeopathic, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and Bach Flower Remedies that could be helpful in alleviating your pet's anxiety. Products I've used, always in conjunction with behavior modification, include homeopathic remedies or Hyland's Calms Forte, Bach Rescue Remedy, Solutions Separation Anxiety, Green Hope Farms Anxiety, or other similar remedies depending on the animal.
- Calming nutraceuticals and herbs that I've found helpful include holy basil (Tulsi), valerian, L-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha, GABA, magnolia, and chamomile. Consult your vet about which option is right for your pet.
- The essential oil of lavender has also been proven to reduce pets' stress response. I recommend placing a few drops on a piece of cloth placed close to your dog's bedding before a stressor occurs, if possible, or diffuse the oil around your house for an overall calming effect (always giving your pets a room that's essential oil-free).

Final Thoughts

Make sure your dog gets plenty of heart-thumping exercise, playtime, mental stimulation, and TLC. The more full her life is when you're around, the calmer she'll be when you're not.

If your dog's separation anxiety is severe enough that she is very destructive when left alone or you're concerned she might hurt herself, you'll need to make other arrangements for her while you work to resolve her issues. A few suggestions:

- Take your dog with you, if possible
- Leave her with a caretaker — maybe a friend who works from home or a retired neighbor or relative
- Hire a dog sitter to stay in your home with your dog
- Take her to a doggy day care
- Consider adopting a playmate

With time, patience and persistence, most dogs with separation anxiety can be relieved of the worst of their troubling symptoms. If your dog's symptoms are getting worse, get the help of a **veterinary behaviorist** or **fear-free behavior professional**, many of whom offer phone consultations.

Sources and References

[dvm360 April 8, 2018](#)

¹ [Zink, M.C. et al. Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Feb 1, 2014;244\(3\):309-19](#)
