

4 Sneaky Signs That Your Dog Suffers From Separation Anxiety

It's not unlike a human panic attack, and your dog can't help himself. But it's a serious behavior problem where the only clue is an exuberant greeting every time you come home, no matter how long you're gone.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Separation anxiety is a common problem for many dogs and their owners
- Signs of separation anxiety include barking or whining, excessive drooling, accidents in the house, and destructive behavior
- True separation anxiety in dogs is comparable to panic attacks in people. Dogs with the disorder have no control over their anxiety or the behavior that results
- Behavior modification and desensitization, combined with plenty of exercise and other targeted strategies can help resolve or greatly relieve separation anxiety in most dogs

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Separation anxiety is a common problem for many dogs and their guardians. To the uninitiated, it may not sound like a big deal, but it's actually a very serious issue.

Dogs who at first seem just exceptionally eager to see their humans are often brewing a full-blown case of separation anxiety just below the surface. Behaviors to watch for in your dog include:

- He needs to be within a few feet of you at all times
- She gives you a frenzied greeting every time you come home, whether you've been gone 5 days or 5 minutes
- His mood changes noticeably as you go about preparing to leave the house
- She engages in behaviors while you're gone that she doesn't do when you're home

Many people tend to confuse some of the more subtle symptoms of separation anxiety for signs of love from their dog. In fact, if she hasn't yet had a significant anxiety episode, you might think her over-the-top greeting each time you return from the mailbox is just a sign of her extreme devotion to you.

Another mistake owners of dogs with separation anxiety often make is to assume their pet's destructiveness in their absence is simple misbehavior. They believe their dog is acting out of boredom or anger at being left behind.

Signs of Separation Anxiety

If your dog has genuine separation anxiety, he feels extreme nervousness when you're away. What he's experiencing is the equivalent of a human panic attack he has no control over, and he's likely exhibiting one or more of the following inappropriate coping behaviors in your absence:

- **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 he's alone or believes he'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 often easy to know if your dog is having a problem when he's home alone because there's evidence of it – a scratched-up door, a puddle of drool, or a pile of poop on the floor, or perhaps a nasty note from an annoyed neighbor taped to your door.

If you're confused about whether your dog is suffering separation anxiety or simple boredom, keep in mind that the behaviors that result from separation anxiety occur only when you're not around and *every* time you're not around.

Behavior Modification Tips

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 temporarily away from home. Some of the following suggestions may seem unkind when you're faced with an anxious dog who doesn't want to be away from you, but it's important to remember the agony she's feeling each time you leave. Your intention is to reduce or eliminate her suffering, for her sake.

Helping your canine companion feel more independent can be accomplished with a variety of behavior modification techniques and other strategies.

Curbing Your Dog's Attention-Seeking Behaviors

- Don't respond in any way 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.
- Ignore your dog for 30 minutes before leaving home. Holding yourself to that half-hour window will prevent you from inadvertently reinforcing your dog's 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.
- When you arrive home, ignore your dog until he's relaxed. Don't interact with or acknowledge him until he's no longer in a welcome-home frenzy.

- 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 he's doing them. Punishing him, especially after the fact, will only increase his anxiety level.

Desensitization to Departure Cues

- Make a list of activities you perform before leaving home that signal to your dog that your departure is imminent and result in her becoming more and more anxious as the time draws near (collecting your keys, coat, purse, etc.). Perform this activity sequence at times when you aren't leaving the house to disassociate the activities with your impending departure.
- At home while going about your day or evening, train your dog to assume a calm, relaxed demeanor during "separations" when you're in one room and he's in another. First, move a short distance from your dog (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, then gradually increase the distance until you're almost out of the room, making sure to give praise and treats when your dog stays relaxed and in place.
- Once you've increased the distance until you're out of your dog's 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.

If this seems like a long, tedious process, it can be – but it's often very effective. From start to finish can take eight 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, positive dog trainer or a **specialist in canine behavior**.

Additional Recommendations

Leave your dog with an article of clothing or blanket with your scent on it. Leave a treat-release toy(s) for your dog to focus on in your absence. Place small treats around the house for her to discover, along with her favorite toys.

Add a flower essence blend like Separation Anxiety by Spirit Essences, Anxiety by Green Hope Farms, or Separation Anxiety Formula from OptiBalance to your dog's drinking water. This works wonders for some dogs. And put on some soothing doggy music before you leave. Homeopathic Aconitum may also help.

Invest in an Adaptil collar or diffuser for your dog. Adaptil is a pheromone and is designed to have a calming affect on dogs. The collar seems to work well for many dog owners with pups suffering from separation anxiety and other stress-related behaviors.

Make sure your dog gets plenty of heart pumping 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 him 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 him to a doggy day care
- Discuss homeopathic, nutraceutical, and herbal relaxants with your holistic veterinarian

With time, patience and persistence, most dogs with separation anxiety can be relieved of the worst of their troubling symptoms.

Sources and References

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