

# One of the Most Vexing Problems Dog Owners Face

Does your dog do her utmost to convince you death is imminent whenever you do this? This common problem usually induces their humans to do all the wrong things in a vain effort to fix the problem. But they're actually just plain counter-productive and won't fix the problem.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Separation anxiety may be triggered by being abandoned or by the loss of an important person in the dog's life
- Destructive behaviors, accidents in the house, and excessive howling, drooling or pacing that occur only when you're away are signs of separation anxiety
- Behavior modification, including avoiding interacting with your pet in the 30 minutes prior to your departure, is essential for helping your pet to overcome separation anxiety

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Separation anxiety is a common behavioral problem, especially in shelter dogs that may have been previously abused or neglected, that can take a serious toll on both pets and their owners.

Sometimes, separation anxiety in pets is painfully obvious. Your dog may, for instance, show signs of distress when you get ready to leave the house.

When you leave, your dog may howl relentlessly, chew up furniture, urinate and defecate on the floor or even try to escape. In other cases, signs of separation anxiety can be subtler, such as drooling or pacing (or trotting along a specific path in your yard).

You can typically determine that your pet's anxious symptoms are due to separation anxiety if they occur only in your absence. A dog that's normally reliably housetrained who has accidents only when you leave is one such example.

Destructive behaviors, including excessive chewing and digging, that occur only when you're gone are another sign. If your dog struggles with separation anxiety, you may be tempted to "baby" your dog or bring him with you everywhere you go.

The other extreme is simply ignoring the anxiety and hoping your dog will grow out of it. But both of these strategies may ultimately make the problem, and your dog's symptoms, worse.

## Why Do Some Dogs Develop Separation Anxiety?

It's not known why some dogs develop separation anxiety and others do not, but it is far more common in dogs adopted from animal shelters. It's likely the anxiety may be triggered by being abandoned or by the loss of an important person in the dog's life.

If you rescue a shelter pet, try implementing **A Sound Beginning's** "welcome home" techniques and music immediately, once your dog is home, to help reduce the potential of separation anxiety from occurring. Separation anxiety may also be triggered by:<sup>1</sup>

- A dramatic, abrupt change in schedule, such as an owner who was previously home all day taking a job away from home for 6 hours a day
- Moving to a new residence
- Changes in the household, such as a death in the family or a child going away to college

## Behavior Modification Is Important for Dogs with Separation Anxiety

First and foremost, if you're not sure your dog is suffering from separation anxiety, contact your veterinarian for a definite diagnosis.

Video of your dog's behaviors can be very helpful here, but laboratory testing may also be done to help rule out underlying medical or behavioral issues. Such examples that might be confused with separation anxiety symptoms include:<sup>2</sup>

- Houstraining problems, submissive urination or a urinary tract infection
- Urine marking
- Destructive chewing or digging, especially among young dogs
- Boredom
- Howling and barking triggered by environmental cues

Once you're sure separation anxiety is the problem, begin behavior modification right away, preferably with the help of a professional. Separation anxiety can be very challenging to overcome and will likely take time, determination and effort on your part to help your pet.

The plan that follows is a general guide you can follow,<sup>3</sup> but for serious cases please seek professional guidance. Your goal is to help your pet reduce his dependence on you so he feels safe and less anxious when you're not home.

These recommendations may sound cold and heartless, but remember in many cases we unknowingly feed our dog's anxiety with how we act, so:

1. **Ignore your pet's attention-seeking attempts** — Any interactions with your dog should be initiated by you and not by your dog.
2. **Avoid interacting with your pet in the 30 minutes prior to your departure** — The idea is to get your dog used to you not being home.

The exception is that when you leave, you can give your dog a treat-dispensing toy to help keep him occupied. Make this a treat your dog really loves and only offer it when you are leaving.

3. **When you arrive home, ignore your dog until he is relaxed** — This helps to reinforce the relaxed behavior.
4. **Get your dog used to departure cues by doing them when you're not really leaving** — For instance, grab your car keys and your wallet or purse. Put on your coat and sunglasses and walk out to your car.

Then, walk back inside instead of driving away. Alternatively, switch up your departure routine so your dog does not anticipate the daily cues that prompt anxiety.

Put your purse and keys in the car before breakfast, feed your dog just before leaving (so they are distracted) and don't acknowledge your departure, just slip out when they're eating.

Discontinuing the verbal dialog many of us have with our pets just prior to leaving can actually dramatically reduce their meltdown after we leave.

You should focus on the departure cues that generate the most anxiety in your dog. By doing them at random times, it will desensitize your dog to these departure cues so hopefully when you really are going to leave, it won't be so stressful to your dog at the outset.

5. **Conduct independence training, in which your dog stays relaxed on a bed or mat while you gradually leave the room** — A **professional trainer** can be very helpful here. If your dog still needs additional help, try graduated departures described below.
6. **Begin graduated departures** in which you gradually increase the time you're away from home and reinforce relaxed behaviors in your dog.

A **specialist in canine behavior** can help you here as well, but to explain briefly, try first just walking to the door, then opening the door, then leaving for a few seconds and increasing the length of time very slowly, working your way up to two hours. The entire process may take eight weeks to complete. It's a tedious process but one that is often very effective.

## When You Need to Help Your Anxious Pet Now

The sooner you implement behavior modification strategies like those listed above, the sooner your pet may start to recover from separation anxiety. That being said, it's a process and one that takes time.

Your dog probably won't overcome separation anxiety overnight, so it's a good idea to have some natural strategies on hand to help minimize anxious symptoms in your dog when you need to leave the house. A coveted treat-release toy is a great option, as mentioned. There are chewing-type toys available that come with specialized tools for filling the toy with moist food. As your pet chews, the food is gradually released.

You can even fill one up and put it in the freezer, which is especially useful for keeping your pet occupied for a longer period. Engaging your dog in an active play session before you leave can also help to calm his nerves and get out some of his energy. You can also:

- Investing in a pheromone diffuser, such as the D.A.P. diffuser for dogs. Species-specific pheromones are chemical substances that can positively affect an animal's emotional state and behavior.
- Consulting a holistic veterinarian about homeopathic, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and Bach Flower Remedies that could be helpful in alleviating your pet's anxiety.

Some products you can use, always in conjunction with behavior modification, include homeopathic aconitum or Hyland's Calms Forte, Bach Rescue Remedy, Separation Anxiety by Spirit Essences, Anxiety by Green Hope Farms or other similar remedies depending on the animal.

- Calming nutraceuticals and herbs that are helpful include holy basil (Tulsi), valerian, L-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha, GABA, 5-HTP, and chamomile. **Consult your holistic vet** about which option is right for your pet.

The essential oil of lavender has also been proven to reduce a pet's stress response as well. Place a few drops on your dog's collar or bedding before a stressor occurs, if possible, or diffuse the oil around your house for an overall calming effect.

It's important to understand that if your dog is destructive or has accidents due to separation anxiety while you're away, this is an anxiety response and not one your dog can easily control. Be sure you do not yell or in any way punish your dog for these behaviors, as this will only increase his anxiety.

Finally, even with the best efforts, some dogs with separation anxiety become too destructive to be left alone. Other dogs may hurt themselves trying to escape. If your dog cannot be safely left home alone, you'll need to make other arrangements until his separation anxiety is under control.

You can bring your dog with you, if possible, or arrange for someone (a friend, family member or pet sitter) to stay with your dog. Some dogs with separation anxiety do well in doggy day care, so determine the best fit for your dog and lifestyle. Hopefully, this will be a temporary arrangement and, after you work through behavior modifications, your dog will be able to stay home alone without undue stress and anxiety.

## Sources and References

<sup>1, 2</sup> [ASPCA, Separation Anxiety](#)

<sup>3</sup> [DVM 360 May 10, 2016](#)