

Whole Dog Journal™



How to Manage Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Your dog's separation anxiety can be treated with these tried and tested training methods. How to help a dog with separation anxiety depends on the dog and his symptoms - here are ways you can calm an anxious dog who hates to be alone.

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA

[Updated March 23, 2017]

Have you ever had the misfortune of walking into your house to find overturned furniture, inches-deep claw gouges on door frames, blood-stained tooth marks on window sills, and countless messages on your answering machine from neighbors complaining about your dog barking and howling for hours on end in your absence? If so, you're probably familiar with the term "separation anxiety" – a mild label for a devastating and destructive behavior.

Thirty years ago the phrase was uncommon in dog training circles. Today it's a rare dog owner who hasn't heard of separation anxiety, experienced it with a one of her own dogs, or at least had a friend whose canine companion reportedly suffered from this difficult disorder. Separation-related behaviors seem more common these days, and sadly, can also result in human frustration and anger – and sometimes even the euthanasia of an offending dog when a despairing owner reaches her wits' end.

In her excellent book, *Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Small Animals*, Dr. Karen Overall defines separation anxiety as, "A condition in which animals exhibit symptoms of anxiety or excessive distress when they are left alone." The most common separation anxiety symptoms in dogs include destructive behavior, house soiling, and excessive vocalization. Many dogs with this challenging behavior also refuse to eat or drink when left alone, don't tolerate crating, pant and salivate excessively when distressed, and go to great lengths to try to escape from confinement, with apparent total disregard for injury to themselves or damage to their surroundings.



It's natural for young mammals to experience anxiety when separated from their mothers and siblings; it's an adaptive survival mechanism. A pup who gets separated from his family cries in distress, enabling Mom to easily find him and rescue him. In the wild, even an adult canine who is left alone is more likely to die – either from starvation, since he has no pack to hunt with, or from attack, since he has no pack mates for mutual protection. For this reason, signs of separation anxiety in puppies is somewhat expected.

A dog with separation anxiety might not be comforted by another dog or person at home. Early on, he may be simply concerned when the human to whom he is most bonded walks out the door; later, he may panic when this happens.

Given the importance of a dog's canine companions, it speaks volumes about the dog's adaptability as a species that we can condition them to accept being left alone at all! We're lucky we don't have far more problems than we do, especially in today's world, where few households have someone at home regularly during the day to keep the dog company.

There was a time in our society when fewer dogs were left home alone – Mom stayed home while Dad went off to work every day – so dogs had less exposure to the kind of daily isolation that contributes to separation anxiety behavior. Some behavior scientists theorize that experiencing a fear-causing event when a young dog is already mildly stressed about being alone can trigger more intense “home alone” anxiety behaviors.

In today's world there are a significant number of dogs who are afflicted with some degree of separation distress. The best solution for how to break a dog's separation anxiety depends largely upon the dog's situation and anxiety triggers. Fortunately, many dog owners these days are willing to seek solutions to behavior problems rather than just “getting rid of” the dog. As a result, behavior professionals are likely to see canine clients with separation distress disorders.

Properly Identifying and Diagnosing Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Another reason separation anxiety seems more prevalent today than a few decades ago is that it is misdiagnosed with some frequency by laypersons. With an increased awareness of the condition has come an increase in misidentification of behaviors that resemble separation distress behaviors, but really aren't.

For example, house soiling can be related to anxiety, but there are many other potential causes. These include incomplete housetraining, lack of access to appropriate elimination areas, unreasonable owner expectations (expecting the dog to “hold it” for 10 hours or more), fear, excitement, marking, submissive elimination, or physical incontinence.

Destructive behavior may be a result of separation anxiety, or it could be normal puppy behavior, play, reaction to outside stimuli, and/or an outlet for excess energy. Separation distress could be the cause of excessive barking and howling, or the dog could be stimulated to bark by street sounds (traffic, people talking), trespassers (i.e., a mail carrier, intruder, Girls Scouts selling cookies), social facilitation (other dogs barking), play, aggression, or fear.

It's critically important that a problem behavior be correctly identified prior to the implementation of a behavior modification program. It does no good to try to modify separation anxiety if that's not really the problem. (See “[Case Study: Misdiagnosis \(/newspics/0708-CASE-STUDY-MISDIAGNOSIS.pdf\)](/newspics/0708-CASE-STUDY-MISDIAGNOSIS.pdf).”)

If a dog pees in the house when left alone as well as when the owner is home, it's more likely a housetraining problem than a separation issue. However, a dog urinating in his crate when the owner leaves the house, but who is fine holding it through the night, is an example of possible separation anxiety.

Separation-related destruction is usually directed toward escape efforts – chewing or clawing at or through doorframes, windowsills, and walls. If the destruction is more generalized throughout the house, it points toward one or more of the other possible causes, rather than an isolation issue. A strategically located video camera or sound-activated tape recorder can help identify possible outside stimuli, such as visitors to the home or unusual noises, that might trigger what otherwise may appear to be separation-related behaviors.

The Difference Between Isolation and Separation Anxiety

Distress over being left alone is not always a full-blown separation anxiety problem. First, a dog may suffer from a mild distress to a severe anxiety disorder. “Distress” indicates a lower intensity of stress behaviors when the dog is alone, while “anxiety” is an extreme panic attack.

The distinction between “isolation” and “separation” is equally important. 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.

Our Cardigan Corgi, Lucy, suffers from moderate isolation distress – she doesn’t like to be left alone outdoors. Before we realized the significance of her behavior, she managed to injure herself badly, falling off a stone wall onto cement steps eight feet below in her persistent attempts to reach us through a window. Indoors, her isolation distress is milder. She may bark briefly if we leave her alone downstairs, but quickly calms and settles.

Missy, on the other hand, demonstrates true separation distress. The eight-year-old Australian Shepherd had been in at least four different homes prior to joining our family last fall. As is sometimes the case with dogs who have been rehomed numerous times, she attached herself to one of her new humans (me) completely and almost instantly.

If our whole family is in the barn, and I go back to the house for some reason, Missy could care less that my husband is still with her in the barn; she becomes hyper-vigilant, watching anxiously for me to return, ignoring Paul’s attempts to reassure her or engage in other activities. Fortunately for us, her stress level is mild; other than some scratches inflicted to our kitchen door on the second day of her arrival to our home, she’s done nothing destructive; her level of stress over my absence is low, and tolerable, and consists primarily of pacing, whining, and barking. But it may explain why we’re at least her fifth (and final!) home.

Behavior Modification Exercises



Never punish! Rather, consider separation anxiety as a potential cause if your dog damages your home (especially doors or windows) when you’re away.

There are a number of steps you can take to resolve your dog's isolation- or separation-anxiety behavior. The program spelled out in the accompanying sidebar, "[Preventing Separation Anxiety \(/newspics/0708-SEPARATION-ANXIETY.pdf\)](#)" can also be used to modify an existing isolation/separation condition. However, you will progress much more slowly through the steps of the program with a dog who suffers from separation-related behaviors; your dog's strong emotional response to being left alone will make this a much more challenging proposition.

Here are some other avenues to explore, to complement your modification work:

- Exercise your dog well before you leave. A tired dog has less energy with which to be anxious and destructive. End exercise sessions 20 to 30 minutes before you go, so he has time to settle down.
- Five minutes before you leave, give him a well-stuffed Kong to take his mind off your imminent departure (See "[King Kongs \(http://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/3_10/features/5086-1.html\)](#)").
- Make your departures and returns completely calm and emotionless. No huggy/kissy "Mummy loves you" scenes. If he gets excited and jumps all over you when you return, ignore him. Turn your back and walk away. When he finally settles down, say hello and greet him very calmly.
- Defuse the pieces of your departure routine by also doing them when you are not leaving. Pick up your car keys and sit down on the sofa to watch TV. Dress in your business suit and then cook dinner. Set your alarm for 5 a.m. on a Saturday, then roll over and go back to sleep.
- Mix up the pieces of your departure routine when you are leaving, so his anxiety doesn't build to a fever pitch as he recognizes your departure cues. We are creatures of habit too, so this is hard to do, but can pay off in big dividends. Eat breakfast before you shower instead of after. Pick up your keys and put them in your pocket before you take your dog out for his final potty break. Put your briefcase in the car while you're still in pajamas. Make the morning as unpredictable as possible.
- Use a "safe" cue such as "I'll be back," only when you know you'll return within the time period your dog can tolerate. As suggested in Patricia McConnell's wonderful booklet on separation anxiety titled "I'll Be Home Soon," this helps your dog relax, knowing he can trust you to return.
- Explore alternative dog-keeping situations to minimize the occasions when you do have to leave him alone - doggie daycare may be suitable for some dogs, but not for others. You may be able to find a neighbor or relative who is house-bound and might appreciate some canine companionship.
- If you are considering adoption of a second dog, try borrowing a calm, stable, compatible dog from a friend, to see if that helps to relieve your dog's distress.
- Try using Comfort Zone (DAP) plug-ins and sprays in his environment to help ease his anxiety. (See "[Please Appease Me \(http://www.whole-dog-journal.com/issues/7_1/features/Calming-Anxious-Dogs_5600-1.html\)](#)").
- Remove as many other stressors from your dog's world as possible to help him maintain his equilibrium in your absence. No choke chains, shock collars, physical or harsh verbal punishment (especially in connection to his anxiety behaviors).
- Consider working with a behavior professional to be sure you're on the right path - and to help you explore the possibilities of using anti-anxiety medications to maximize the effectiveness of your modification efforts.

Fixing separation anxiety is hard work. It's all too easy to get frustrated with your dog's destructive behavior. Remember that he's not choosing to do it out of spite or malice – he is panicked about his own survival without you, his pack, there to protect him. It's not fun for him, either; he lives in the moment, and the moments that you are gone are long and terrifying. If you make the commitment to modify his behavior and succeed in helping him be brave about being alone, you'll not only save your home from destruction, you will enhance the quality of your dog's life immensely – as well as your own – and perhaps save him from destruction, too.

Pat Miller, CPDT, is WDJ's Training Editor. Miller lives in Hagerstown, Maryland, site of her Peaceable Paws training center. Pat is also author of The Power of Positive Dog Training; Positive Perspectives: Love Your Dog, Train Your Dog; Positive Perspectives II: Know Your Dog, Train Your Dog, and the brand-new Dog Play: How and Why to Play With Your Dog.

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Comments (19)

I dunno, but it always seems odd to me to leave a dog alone with the running of the house.

I would think to have some place where the dog is used to being left (either alone or with the other dogs of the household) without the humans present.

Then remember to use it regularly at times when you are home. Start with very brief absences, and return when the dog is calm.

Posted by: Jenny H | May 22, 2017 6:28 PM

Hi, just asking if you had experience with dogs who refused to drink but eat OK, slow moving, does not bark much as before. I have moved job to another state but my family is with him. Is this separation anxiety? The Vet cannot find anything wrong with him.

Posted by: Zozing | May 3, 2017 7:56 PM

Hi there, my shepherd mix just had to go from living in a house with a fully open yard he could access whenever he pleases to an apartment, and we had to go back to crating when his destruction every time I left the house got out of control.

He destroyed his first crate in this apartment... WE replaced it with a ProSelect which he can't get out of but he destroys anything I put in there with him, even his bed he's had for three years (he is three), his longest lasting stuff animal, his metal bowl... I started only leaving durable toys in there but now he goes for the bars of the kennel. These bars are stronger unlike the old ones and he can't damage them, which has unfortunately meant that he's hurting his own mouth in his anxiety. He's knocked out three teeth, & has two deep lacerations that I'm afraid might mean his canines will be going next. Today I put him in there and sat watching tv (it's my day off) and he was panting so fast I was afraid he was going to go into cardiac arrest.

I've tried classical music but it doesn't seem to help. He won't go in for his morning food, or if he does and I leave, he ends up knocking it all out and not eating. We tried PetRelief spray (going on week four I think) but it doesn't seem to be helping.

If anyone could please help. I love my dog so much, but I just moved cross country and can't afford another trainer right now, and he's not good with strangers so I can't ask someone to come visit while I work... his stress over this is giving ME anxiety. I just want to help him. I don't want him to be panicked or hurting himself. Please help.

Posted by: Alexz | November 26, 2016 9:16 PM

@GarryR16 We had problems with our dog also. He used to bark and chew shoes, table etc when we were not at home. Both my wife and I work a lot and had no time to take our Bud to dog training classes. We asked one friend who works in foster care (he is always surrounded by dogs) what we should do. He recommended one online dog behavior trainer. I love this trainer <http://bit.ly/1SGzTK7>

It helped us a lot, and I strongly recommend it for you.

Posted by: Jason0502 | November 1, 2016 5:45 PM

I am getting a new puppy if she has separation anxiety will the fact that I have a another dog stop her separation anxiety? Does having another dog stop separation anxiety?

Posted by: Shelley Huber | July 22, 2016 10:59 AM

I took my puppy from a dog foster home about a year ago. I love him to bits; he has a great personality, and I feel that he loves our family so much. BUT he barks A LOT. . So, leaving home is always a challenge for us. My wife and I were thinking about taking him to 'doggy school', but then again, it's extremely expensive, and the nearest 'doggy school' is far away from us. Maybe you have some advice? THANK YOU!!!!

Posted by: GarryR16 | July 20, 2016 8:47 PM

We adopted Toby, a pointer/lab mix, about 6 months ago and found that our happy chappy was beyond stressed when we left him alone. At first we left him in his crate with toys and treats. He cried pitifully when we left but was quiet when we got home. However, we saw signs of destruction, and he was completely distraught when my husband left the house, even if I was there. After videoing him in his crate while we were gone, we realized that he was howling and crying and trying to get out the whole time we were gone, only calming when he heard the garage door open. It was heartbreaking to watch. We got Patricia McConnell's excellent books, also Nicole Wilde's book on separation anxiety and Turid Rugaas's book on calming signals.

For several months, one of us was home with him, or a friend stayed. We abandoned the crate and gradually he began to trust that we would not disappear. A real turning point came when we started using the DAP plugins. They don't work for every dog, but they made a huge difference for Toby. After a few weeks, we noticed that he was not so distraught when my husband left. We began to try short trips out together, with the video running. He settled down not long after we left. We have our social life back now, thank goodness. With the warm weather, he gets a lot more exercise and we've been attending dog training classes that he loves. My husband is retired and I'm a freelancer working from home, so he's not generally left alone all day.

By all accounts, Toby was a well-loved dog who had to be given up because his family both lost their jobs and moved in with family members who couldn't have him there. We think that trauma triggered his extreme anxiety. He'll always be a high strung little guy, but he's lost the panic when we leave. He doesn't like being left, but we think he now knows we'll be back. We're still using the DAP in my office where he sleeps on my futon. We ran out for a week or two in the spring and noticed his anxiety ratcheting up. We'll try going without in a few months. He is much calmer these days and doesn't feel the need to be with us every moment, freely wandering the house and yard and going about his own doggy business.

For all of you struggling with separation anxiety, the suggestions in this article and the books I mentioned are excellent. We utilized many of them, including playing the music from Through a Dog's Ear when we left, changing our leaving routines and taking small, incremental steps to build his confidence that we'd return. It took time and a variety of strategies to help Toby, but he is doing well and we love living with a dog again.

Posted by: cwolf | June 6, 2016 10:11 AM

I was retired when I got my newest Lab puppy. He's so used to having me around that he cries if I go to the bathroom! And he's not my only dog.

Posted by: clangfor | June 5, 2016 3:47 PM

My Papillon seems to only have anxiety when I leave or with me. I left him at my girlfriends house all day yesterday and last night and he was wonderful. With me, he constantly paces and whines for no reason. If he get into my bedroom he will also lift his leg somewhere in my bedroom. I have no idea what to do.

Posted by: Josie0526 | February 28, 2016 9:57 AM

Great article , thanks. My rescue Belgian Shepherd is destructive at night when we go upstairs to bed. he is chewing up beds almost every night. We have 2 older dogs so she isn't lonely which makes me believe it is separation anxiety. Would giving her a chew toy or a long-lasting chew treat be a strategy or should I take her on a walk before bed?

Posted by: Mindy | April 30, 2014 4:12 PM

To Val with Ridgeback/Dane cross. This definitely sounds like an allergy. I would change his food to something like Wellness Core Ocean that is a fish & potato food with no grains. I have had 2 dogs with allergies & they chewed on their paws. When we changed their food, it stopped the chewing completely. Your vet should have done a blood panel to check his thyroid which can sometime present with skin issues which might cause him to chew where it itches.

Good luck to you!

Posted by: Abelheart | April 4, 2014 11:07 AM

To Val with Xridgeback/G.Dane – could be a food related issue – had a GSD that chewed his back foot and sometimes his tail – found out he was allergic to any of the dog kibbles I fed him, had to do homemade food and it eventually cleared up and he stopped.

Posted by: Aussiegirl | April 4, 2014 3:29 AM

I need some advice, my beautiful X Ridgeback/Great Dane has a terrible habit of chewing two of his paws and legs, Right front and left back. I have had him at the Vet time and again, and he has also given up. He has had a bucket on his head also one of those plastic lampshades for want of a better word but he still manages to reach his legs by squashing the hoods. He has eaten yards and yards of bandages and eaten off anything I put on him be it Purple wound spray, bitter wound spray, hot chilli powder, cayenne pepper, tabasco sauce, all which help with pain if that is what he is experiencing. It looks as if it is just a bad habit like someone who bites their nails. Friars Balsam, Germolene, Healing creams, you name it he eats it off. I am tired of picking up stringy bandage filled poo and green poo from the purple wound spray!! What does anybody suggest. I give him hoofy chews and he is an indoor dog so he isn't left outside. He gets enough love and attention as he thinks he is a lap dog and loves to cuddle and get stroked and made a fuss of. This has been ongoing for a few years and sometimes the legs heal a bit and then it starts all over again. HELP.

Posted by: Val van Rooyen | April 3, 2014 12:30 PM

I know it's more of a psychoanalytic approach but the brain-body connection cannot be denied -- especially in such a sensitive soul like my hound dog Erik.

It was negligence on my part. Not intentionally, of course, but negligence, nonetheless. It was forgetting who he was and what he needed and what a sensitive little guy he was.

First mistake- stopping his probiotics. I thought his sensitive stomach had acclimated.

Second- Believing he was stronger and less anxious than he was. My parents were absent at the same time and my schedule was extremely busy because of school, work, soccer, hockey, and working out. Arrangements should've been made to cancel the unnecessary as it wouldn't have hurt me to do so. Somehow, I reasoned with myself that Erik would be fine in his own for extended periods of time- amounts of time, now that I look back, were never amounts of time he had been alone before.

The last time Erik had been left alone for longer than 2 or 3 hours was in 2009 when I had to visit the emergency room and my Mom had to take me. When that happened Erik ended up having a vomiting attack so bad he had to be giving anti-vomiting medication and a subcutaneous water pack.

Fast forward to October 1, 2013-October 11. Almost everyday Erik found himself alone for a minimum of 4 hours to a maximum of 10. Not only was he under tremendous stress but his bowels were upset because of his sensitivity.

By 11pm on Friday, October 11, his body could no longer handle the stress and anxiety of being left alone. Left alone with an overly sensitive stomach and soul.

It hurts to look back and realize the numerous mistakes and lies I told myself.

I understand some doctors and friends will say- don't blame yourself, he had underlying health problems. However, I counteract that by showing the evidence. A sensitive soul unaccustomed to hours of alone time.

It hurts that I so easily blinded myself. That I had pushed aside the reality of his sensitivity. That I didn't recognize the very unique circumstances with a very sensitive soul.

I know such analysis won't bring him back. I can only feel the pain of such terrible mistakes and ignorance. His death was preventable had I stepped back and really looked at who he was and what his needs really were.

Some people may ask I put this aside or pretend it isn't true. But Mommies know, even if it's too late to make it better.

Thank you for your time and I appreciate any honest feedback.

Posted by: bozobarr | November 5, 2013 10:13 AM

I do not know what to do. Short version, I hope.... Tal is an Alaskan Husky that came to us 3 weeks ago from a family home. Since he came to us, while we have been at school, Tal has DESTROYED many things in our home. He does not urinate or defecate in the house, he does not bark crazily while we are gone, he eats well, he does not follow us around relentlessly when we are home.... He has a playmate, 4 year old Remi. We have 1/2 acre fenced in yard with woods. We have dog door so the dogs come and go as they like. I don't think, from what I have read, that Tal has separation anxiety. BUT I can't seem to find what he "does have" or how we can address it. THOUGHTS???

Posted by: Hunter333 | October 17, 2013 6:01 PM

We are having a really hard time with our GSD who was recently injured back in the beginning of March. Her separation anxiety has gotten so bad that I can't leave her even 5 minutes. She works herself into such a tizzy that she is practically hyperventilating when I return. I could be going to the mailbox for the mail or a walk around the block it doesn't seem to matter. I feel that the things we did to help her during her injury (she's still recovering) may have actually caused the problem. For example, we are taking turns sleeping downstairs on an air mattress because she can't do stairs. We've tried the crate but that didn't work it only made her chewing her paws worse. I've gotten an inflatable neck collar which keeps her away from her splint but she can still reach her back paws. I know I have to get her used to being alone again but not sure how to start ... just as an FYI, she's never liked KONG

Posted by: emkeyes | April 30, 2013 8:38 AM

The solution for a friend's dog with separation anxiety was to get a kitten for him. After that he had no problem being left alone. He had the kitten.

Posted by: Olivia R | April 1, 2013 9:50 PM

Even Vets don't understand this. I took my 15 yr dog to the vet and she had to spend the night. It was a weekend and I couldn't see her. She had great separation issues, so much so that I took her with me everywhere cause she suffered so much away from me. I saw her Sat at noon. They said she tore out her IV and was barking non stop when they came in Sunday morning. She wasn't being let out to pee and she would not go in the kennel which added stress. They said she was ready to go home Sunday but they were only open 1 hr. I went to get her and she saw me across the room and was trying to get me but when I didn't have the full payment[over 500] they said I couldn't have her and took her in the back. I never got to pet her even. She barked non stop all night. The next day I went to pick her up and she could hardly breathe, the vet said it was from barking for me. I paid took her home and she died 1 hr later [her lungs filled with fluid]. I hate to think of the panic she felt that last day and wonder if all the barking and stress [or extra fluid they gave her Monday] that killed her. I never knew when I took her in that I would not be allowed to go sit with her or see her cause it was a weekend. You think Vets would know this. I not only lost my dog but the hurt I feel from her suffering is overwhelming.

Posted by: hmariewv | May 21, 2012 12:10 PM

Thanks, Pat, for this excellent article. As a canine behavior specialist who works not only with owners but with rescue groups, I have heard so many heartbreaking stories about dogs who were given up or worse due to separation issues. It truly can be one of the most challenging behaviors to deal with, and the more education owners have access to, the better the chances that dogs will stay in their homes.

– Nicole Wilde, author "Don't Leave Me! Step-by-Step Help for Your Dog's Separation Anxiety"

Posted by: doglover1111 | September 30, 2011 9:29 PM