

Separation anxiety in dogs is the fear or dislike of isolation, which often results in undesirable behavior. Separation anxiety is one of the most common causes of canine behavioral problems.

As social animals, it is normal for puppies to form attachments to their mother and littermates. Once a puppy is separated from its family group, it becomes attached to its owner. Attachment implies a trusting relationship and is the foundation of a good, healthy bond between owner and pet. However, when a dog becomes overly dependent on its owner, problem behaviors may result.

Dogs develop SA for one of two reasons; they are born with a genetic predisposition to become anxious or afraid when under stress, or the owner of the dog has made the dog neurotic by creating an emotional co-dependent relationship with the dog.

Separation anxiety may occur in dogs with an abnormal predisposition to dependency. Traumatic events in a young dog's life may also increase the likelihood of the development of very strong attachments. These events include;

- **Early separation from the bitch**
- **Deprivation of attachment early in life (puppies kept in pet shops or animal shelters)**
- **A sudden change of environment (new home, stay at a kennel)**
- **A change in owner's life-style which results in a sudden end to constant contact with the animal**
- **A long-term or permanent absence of a family member (divorce, death, child leaving home) or**
- **The addition of a new family member (baby, pet)**

There is a particular type human personality that seems to be able to create SA in almost any dog that they acquire. The elements of this personality are:

1. **Over emotional interactions with the dog**
2. **Tendency to "baby" the dog**
3. **Reluctance to obedience train the dog (it's too mean)**
4. **Refusal to crate train the dog (it's too mean, and I wouldn't like it)**
5. **Overly permissive or inconsistent with establish and maintaining boundaries**
6. **Neurotically, over-protective; unable to relax and let the dog engage in normal, canine behaviors**
7. **Projecting human emotions and motivations on to the dog**
8. **Using the dog as an "emotional surrogate" to replace the need to interact with other human being**
9. **Histrionics/Hysterics if the dog has a natural unpleasant experience: getting dirty, roughhousing with another dog, getting a scrap or small bite, falling down, etc.**
10. **Reluctance to leave the dog alone, for any length of time, for any reason. Women tend to carry toy dogs perched between their breasts or under the arm pit.**

The dog is not comfortable staying in a room by himself when the owner is home. He follows the owner from room to room and becomes upset if prevented from doing so (by a barrier of any kind: leash, baby gate, door).

- Typically, the dog builds an unusually strong bond with one member of a family, usually the wife or the family member that works from home.
- Dog is always on a lap, in the arms, in the bed or touching the family member that it has neurotically over-bonded with.
- Some dogs may show physiological signs of fear, such as increased heart and breathing rate, panting, salivating, increased activity, and urinating and/or defecating.
- After the initial frantic period, the dog may settle down to chew something the owners have recently touched or worn and may then curl up in the midst of the debris.

In milder forms of anxiety, little or no destruction occurs, instead the dog collects the owner's personal belongings and merely curls up with them. There are other dogs that will re-arrange a family members personal belongings or household items in peculiar patterns as a way to reduce mental tension.

Every dog afflicted with separation anxiety reacts somewhat differently. Some dogs only engage in one problem behavior while others may engage in several. Many dogs can sense when their owner is leaving and become anxious even before the owner leaves the house.

- The dog may follow the owner from room to room, whimper, shake or even become aggressive as the owner tries to depart . The dog's anxiety level peaks within 30 minutes of departure and this is usually when most damage is done.
- Dogs displaying separation anxiety will often scratch and dig at doors and windows in an attempt to follow their owner. Chewing on household objects is also very common.
- Some dogs urinate and defecate in unacceptable locations such as by the door or on their owner's bed. Whining and barking for an extended period are also common concerns.
- Other dogs become depressed and will not eat or drink while their owner is gone. This is especially detrimental if the owner is gone for an extended period.
- In rare cases, dogs will have diarrhea, vomit or engage in self-mutilation after being left alone. Most affected dogs will become overly excited when the owner arrives home and will engage in an unusually prolonged, hyperactive greeting.

- **Punishing your dog. Punishment is not an effective way to treat separation anxiety. In fact, punishing your dog after you return home may actually increase his separation anxiety.**
- **Getting another pet as a companion for your dog. This usually doesn't help an anxious dog because his anxiety is the result of his separation from you, his person, not merely the result of being alone.**
- **Crating your dog without proper training. Your dog will still engage in anxiety responses in the crate. He may urinate, defecate, howl, or even injure himself in an**

attempt to escape from the crate. In cases that are this severe, the owner may have to purchase an aluminum or steel crate. Separation anxiety is not the result of disobedience or lack of training; it's a panic response.

- **Exercise your dog well in advance of your departure. For dogs like retrievers and setters, this can mean over an hour of aerobic exercise.**
- **Feed him a small meal, heavy in carbs, about 45 minutes to an hour before leaving. IGNORE your dog for the 30 minutes before you leave home, and when you return. Do not say good-bye or hello.**
- **When you return, ignore your dog for the first 15-30 minutes. If you cannot bring yourself to totally ignore him, then you have created the dog's anxiety by installing and nurturing a co-dependent relationship with the dog.**
- **Give your dog Melatonin 9mgs per day, divided into 3 doses.**
- **Begin to obedience train your dog to an advanced level to create a feeling of constancy, courage and calmness in your dog.**
- **Anti-anxiety medications are sometimes used to suppress anxiety. These are often used on dogs with severe separation anxiety or when owners simply must leave the dog alone for an extended period while treatment is occurring. The use of drugs allows the dog to spend extended periods of time free of anxiety. A vet should be consulted for further information on the safest and most effective anxiety-suppressing drugs.**
- **However, in most cases, drugs do not offer a solution and should be used in combination with a treatment program.**
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For a minor separation anxiety problem, the following techniques may be helpful by themselves. For more severe problems, these techniques should be used along with the desensitization process described in the next section.

1. **Keep arrivals and departures low-key. For example, when you arrive home, ignore your dog for the first few minutes, then calmly pet him. This may be hard for you to do, but it's important!**
2. **Leave your dog with an article of clothing that smells like you-such as an old t-shirt that you've slept in recently.**

3. Establish a "Safety Cue" a word or action that you use every time you leave that tells your dog you'll be back. Dogs usually learn to associate certain cues with short absences by their owners.
4. **The Safety Cue.** For example, when you take out the garbage, your dog knows you come right back and doesn't become anxious. Therefore, it's helpful to associate a safety cue with your short-duration absences.

The following stages should be undertaken when you have some time to spend at home, such as on a weekend. While these training steps won't cure Canine Separation Anxiety completely, they will reduce the frequency and intensity of the emotional outbursts:

Stage 1 - Introduce mental separation. Completely ignore the dog for a period of 30 minutes while in the same room. Ignoring means: do not touch, look at, or speak to the dog.

Stage 2 - Introduce physical separation. Restrict the dog's access to you. This could be done with the use of a tether which the dog cannot chew through. Combine with mental separation.

Stage 3 - Increase the distance of the physical separation. The dog is tethered further from you, but still within sight. Combine with mental separation.

Stage 4 - Cut off dog's visual contact with you within the same room. He cannot see you, but he can smell you and hear you.

Stage 5 - Move dog into another room while you are still home. Dog can still hear you and smell you.

INTERIM SOLUTIONS

Because the treatments described above can take a while, and because a dog with separation anxiety can do serious damage to himself and/or your home in the interim, consider these suggestions to help you and your dog cope in the short term.

Consult your veterinarian about the possibility of drug therapy. A good anti-anxiety drug should not sedate your dog, but simply reduce his anxiety while you're gone. Such medication is a temporary measure and should be used in conjunction with behavior modification techniques.

1. **Take your dog to a dog day care facility or boarding kennel**
2. **Leave your dog with a friend, family member, or neighbor**
3. **Take your dog to work with you, even for half a day, if possible**

When a puppy or new dog is brought into the home, it is important to avoid situations that may encourage an excessive attachment to develop.

Your dog should slowly become accustomed to staying alone and preferable become accustomed to a crate. This can be accomplished by crate-training when the pup is young.

As well, ensuring that the dog does not constantly follow the owner and gradually adjusts to being alone in the house will go a long way toward a healthy owner-pet relationship.

If you think your pet may be the victim of separation anxiety it is important to take measures to alleviate the problem soon. Unfortunately, SA is not something that will simply disappear with time.

In fact, if not treated, Canine SA will get worse and on occasion so bad that the dog must either be rehomed or killed. That is the hard truth about this mental illness.

It is important to remember that your pet is not bad or trying to make life miserable-although it sometimes may feel that way! Your pet is the victim of a disorder that can be treated.

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