

## Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is one of the most common behavioral problems dogs suffer from. Separation anxiety causes dogs to act out when their owners leave them alone. They may bark constantly, eliminate in the house, or destroy the house or yard by digging and chewing. In cases of separation anxiety, this behavior always occurs when the affected dog is left alone or the owner is absent. Approximately 10-15% of dogs exhibit symptoms of this disorder. Separation anxiety can occur at any age. Most puppies suffer from it but eventually learn to deal with being left alone.

A number of things can cause separation anxiety in an adult dog. Dogs that have been in multiple homes or dogs that were abandoned by their previous owners are especially susceptible. Their previous owners left and never came back, and they may worry their current owners will abandon them. Lifestyle changes that cause the owner to be home less frequently or even home at a different time can also set it off. If the owner is on vacation and spending more time with the dog, the dog may become distressed when the owner returns to work. Some dogs are also abnormally attached to their owners and will become distressed any time the owner is absent, even if no changes have occurred. If your dog suffers from separation anxiety, it is important to remember that he/she is not misbehaving intentionally while you are gone.

Your dog is not waiting for you to leave so they can destroy property or misbehave. He/she is distressed and anxious because you are not there. The anxiety and nervous energy is causing them to act out. Punishment for negative behavior will not put an end to this. Most destructive behavior starts within the first 20 minutes after you leave. By the time you get home to discover the mess, they will no longer be capable of comprehending what they are being punished for.

Treatment of separation anxiety takes time. There are a number of things you can do to help correct this problem. Help your dog understand that the separation is not permanent and is not something to dread. This can be accomplished by positive reinforcement. Start with leaving for a short period of time, a few minutes and gradually build up to longer times. Do this several times a day until your dog is comfortable with being left alone for several hours. It's a good idea to change your leaving routine at this time. If you always do the same thing before you leave, alter it slightly.

A prolonged leaving routine can allow a dog's anxiety to begin to build even before you leave. Leave as quickly and uneventfully as possible and do not make a big fuss when you return. Do not allow your dog to get bored. Boredom encourages chewing and digging behaviors. Make sure your dog has plenty of toys, etc. when you are absent. Make sure he/she gets plenty of exercise. A long walk before you leave can be helpful. Some owners find leaving a television or radio on helpful. You might also consider making an audio tape or normal household activity to play when you are not at home. Do not call your dog's name on the tape or speak to him/her directly as this may confuse or distress him/her.

Getting another dog to keep your dog company may be helpful if your dog is having a problem with being left alone entirely. This may not work if your dog's separation anxiety is due to an abnormal attachment to you.

If your dog is unusually dependent on you, you should decrease, his/ her dependence gradually. Don't pay constant attention to your dog. Too much attention can create dependence. Try to accustom him/her to spending some time alone when you are home. This is not to say that you should ignore your dog completely, he or she still needs attentions and affection.

If you are unsuccessful at correction your dog's separation anxiety yourself, consult your veterinarian or an animal behavior specialist. In some cases, your veterinarian may prescribe medications to alleviate your dog's anxiety, but these should be used as a last resort.

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