

SEPARATION ANXIETY: Prevention and Treatment

What is separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a serious emotional state in which a dog becomes anxious and panicked when his owner is absent. The physical manifestations of it have been compared to a panic attack in humans.

Shelter dogs are at an increased risk for developing separation anxiety. They have had bonded relationships with humans in the past which have been severed and so they may likely bond more strongly in subsequent human relationships. In addition, it may have been the animal's separation anxiety that brought about his surrender to the shelter in the first place. While any dog can conceivably develop sep. anx., it occurs more frequently with dogs who are particularly affiliative toward humans – softer, sweeter, less “independent” dogs.

What are the typical symptoms of sep. anx.?

- ✓ vocalization: barking, howling, or whining
- ✓ destruction: chewing, digging, or scratching, often around entrances and exits
- ✓ self-mutilation: repeated licking or chewing of certain body parts in an effort to self-comfort
- ✓ physical manifestations: panting or drooling, sweaty pads, dilated pupils, trembling or shaking
- ✓ elimination: breaking of house-training practices
- ✓ anorexic behavior: refusal to eat or drink in your absence

Hyper-Attachment

Dog fanciers and trainers alike are guilty of over-diagnosing separation anxiety in dogs who express separation sensitivity. Separation anxiety is a clinical term that should be strictly reserved for the serious state of panic.

Instead, I like to use the term *hyper-attachment* to label a constellation of behaviors typified by: constant following in the home, exaggerated excitement upon return after even a short absence, heightened anxiety when separated from the human family in environments away from home, anxious behavior when the dog is positioned so she can able watch departure from the home, etc.

Often such dogs are perfectly fine when their lives are routinized but they get overly anxious with change. So, should there be a need to vary your dog's routine, such as leaving her at another family member's house on occasion, steps should be taken to increase her comfort in this new context. Separation anxiety treatment protocols can be employed to build tolerance to aloneness in different situations.

Be aware that hyper-attachment, left unresolved, can develop into separation anxiety.

How best to start your relationship together?

Start prevention protocols from day one. All too often, new owners spend every moment of their first days together with their dog, eventually having to return to work, leaving a distraught dog at home alone. Make sure to start exercises in separation from your new dog right away.

Will crate-training my dog help prevent/treat separation anxiety?

Having your dog happy and comfortable with a crate can be helpful but not necessary when practicing sep. anx. protocols. The crate provides a place for your dog to have enforced separation from you while you come and go, but a room with a door or a baby gate can also be used. (For the sake of simplicity, the remainder of the hand-out will refer to the use of a crate.)

Separation anxiety prevention protocols:

- 🐾 Leave your dog in his crate with a Kong[®] stuffed with something yummy, like peanut butter or liverwurst. Start with short absences from the room, just a few seconds. Gradually increase the duration of your absence, making sure that your dog is still happily working away at his toy. Keep everything low-key, drifting in and out of the room.



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- 🐾 When you return, pick up his toy. The yummy treats are his only when you are not present. Pretty soon he'll be looking forward to your absences!
- 🐾 Remember to randomize the duration of your absences, one time being away a little longer, the next time a little shorter. You don't want your dog to think that you'll *always* be gone for long stretches. Sometimes it's only a few seconds, right? Nothing to get anxious about!
- 🐾 If your dog has begun to get at all anxious, protesting from the crate, you may have increased the duration too quickly or the session may have been too long. Quit long before he's had enough.

Separation anxiety treatment protocols:

- 🐾 For your dog, certain triggers may become associated with your departure. Putting your shoes and coat on, grabbing your purse or briefcase, jingling your keys may all be indicative of departure to your dog – even their ordering may become a chain of events that the dog recognizes. Work on decoupling these triggers by performing them randomly without their resulting in departure. So, for example, jingle your keys, then drop them back on the table, while you're watching TV. Fiddle with the front door lock, even open the front door, then simply close and lock it again. Who says the door opening means you're leaving?! This is called *desensitizing* the triggers.
- 🐾 Now try to teach your dog to feel differently about the triggers. Give your dog a Kong[®] stuffed with something yummy, and perform the trigger (like jingling the keys or opening the front door). Then, promptly take the Kong[®] away. You are *counterconditioning* your dog, changing the way he feels about those triggers. Little by little, over the next days and weeks, increase the intensity of the triggers, like jingling the keys *and* opening the door, etc.
- 🐾 During the treatment phase, *your dog should not be left alone*. This is because you are working on lower intensity, below threshold sessions of aloneness. Exposing your dog to the full-blown 8-hour workday will be more than he can handle and will set back all the work you've done thus far. Find a pet sitter, a doggie day care, a friend, maybe take him to work, whatever it takes. It will be worth the effort in the long run.

Some things to consider:

- 🐾 Exercise is a great way to prepare your dog for time alone. A dog whose energy has been spent on a nice, brisk run will be more ready to settle down quietly for a little rest. So, before beginning exercises in enforced aloneness, exercise your dog to take the edge off his energy level.
- 🐾 Practice low-key departures and arrivals. Emotional histrionics only serve to emotionally charge the time around your comings and goings. When you take a trip out to the kitchen, do you bid a fond, emotional farewell to your dog? Probably not. So make the same sort of departures when you leave home.
- 🐾 For a dog with severe separation anxiety, your vet may prescribe a medication like Clomicalm to take the edge off the anxiety, giving you the opportunity to do the behavior modification protocols. Eventually you may be able to wean him off the medication entirely.

Owner-Absent Misbehaviors

Owner-absent misbehaviors like barking or destruction are frequently attributed to separation anxiety, when it is really just that the dog isn't getting enough exercise or hasn't been properly educated in acceptable alternative outlets. It is important to accurately diagnose your dog's problem before commencing treatment.

WOOF GANG can help you help your dog build greater ease with separation. Call **646.345.5116** today!

For more information on separation anxiety and its prevention and treatment, read Patricia McConnell's booklet *I'll Be Home Soon: How to Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety*.



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