

Separation-Related Distress in Dogs

What is separation anxiety?

The term separation anxiety is often used to describe dogs that exhibit behavioral and/or physiological signs of anxiety when they are left without a favored social companion. The behaviors typically do not occur when dogs have favored companionship. New research has shown that the emotional component for these behaviors may be different for different dogs. Some dogs are very anxious, others are mainly frustrated, and some lack environmental enrichment.

Another consideration is that physical illnesses, particularly diseases that cause pain, can trigger emotional changes that reduce a dog's comfort when they are alone. The term "separation related problems" may more accurately reflect the wide range of behaviors and emotions that can occur when dogs are left without a preferred social companion.



The most common signs related to distress while alone include vocalization (howling, whining, or barking), salivation, destructive behavior, and indoor urination or defecation. Sometimes, the intensity of distress is so high that dogs try to escape from their crate or even from the house. They can cause major damage to exit points such as doors and windows and can harm themselves while attempting to breach the barrier.

Other signs of distress include lack of appetite or self-trauma (licking or chewing themselves) when alone. You may even notice signs of distress as you prepare to leave the house — panting or pacing as you put on your coat or pick up your keys. If your dog is showing any of these signs, contact your veterinarian for a physical and behavioral evaluation. There is much that can be done to help prevent and treat separation anxiety.

How can I meet the needs of my dog to help prevent separation-related problems?

All dogs have essential needs they need met to remain physically and mentally healthy. Dogs need proper nutrition, medical care, and grooming. Daily needs include:

- Physical exercise
- Mental stimulation, such as reward-based training
- Protection from stress or fear
- Opportunities for comfortable social interactions, such as interactive play and walks
- Sleep

Develop a routine that ensures your dog's needs are met. Even when they are not rigid, routines build predictability, which in turn can reduce anxiety and frustration.

What is independence training?

Some dogs with separation-related problems exhibit signs of over-attachment. They may not relax unless a favorite person is nearby. Does your dog follow you around the house, only settling if asked to do so? Independence training exercises teach your dog to relax on her own — an important skill for those times when a social companion is not available.

Exercise 1: Downtime

Build time into your dog's day for naps or relaxation, without social interactions. Offer a chew toy, food dispensing toy, stuffed treat holder, or meal in the desired “downtime” location. Tethering or anchoring the food dispenser to the downtime location can help encourage your dog to enjoy a tasty snack even when you are in another room.

If your dog readily enjoys her toy, continue to practice this training regularly. If your dog appears conflicted or distressed when you leave her with her tethered toy (for instance, she tries to follow you or runs back and forth between the toy and you) then you will need to train this skill more gradually.



Start by staying with your dog in the downtime area. After a few sessions, move further away. Finally, extend the length of the session by using a more challenging food toy or by adding a baby gate so your dog cannot follow you. Return often to reward your dog for relaxing, even after the snacks are finished.

Exercise 2: Settle in Place

This helpful exercise teaches a dog to settle and remain in a designated location, such as a mat, bed, crate, room, or pen. “Settle in place” has many useful applications and can be incorporated into the “downtime” exercise.

To begin, choose a mat or comfortable bed for your dog. A pheromone product such as Thunderease® may be dabbed onto the bed before a session. At first, sit close to the mat and reward your dog with quiet praise, gentle pets, and some occasional treats. Use a cue such as “settle” or “relax” as your dog shows signs of relaxing. Some dogs relax well when they are gently massaged. The idea is for your dog to associate feeling calm and relaxed with the mat or bed.



Next, move to a chair that is slightly away, quietly encouraging your dog to remain settled by using a calming cue such as “relax”. Then practice walking to the other room and returning, encouraging your dog to remain settled even as you get busy. Finally, bring the mat or bed to the area where your dog will stay when you leave the house, and practice in that location.

When should I practice leaving the house?

If your dog settles well, even when you are not in the area, casually open the door and step outside. Then, without fussing, return and continue your prior activity. Your dog should not become distressed or overly attentive to you stepping outside for a moment. If your dog's settle spot is not near the door, monitor her with a camera to be sure that she remains calm.

Gradually stay outside for a little longer, **but only if she remains calm**. She may get up to check the door, but should go back to settling. If your dog does not settle on her own easily, then discontinue training and consult with a behavior professional. A veterinary behaviorist can determine whether you need modifications on these basic exercises and whether medication might be advisable to ensure progress.

What are pre-departure cues?

Pre-departure cues are signals your dog notices that indicate you are about to leave the house. They may include putting on shoes or a coat, picking up a wallet or handbag, or jingling car keys. Try to notice if there are cues your dog alerts to. Then try to make these cues less predictive of a departure. Put on your shoes or coat or work shoes even if you are not going anywhere. Occasionally, jingle your keys and continue your in-home activity. Don't make a fuss; eventually your dog will stop alerting to these signals, since they no longer predict you will be leaving.

Do dogs benefit from cheerful good-byes?

Dogs pick up on our emotions. We don't want to leave them alone any more than they want to be left. It may be best to leave quietly, with no drama. Similarly, when you first return home, curb your enthusiasm until your dog is not overly excited. Try sitting on a chair and gently petting your dog while he unwinds.

When should I seek professional help?

If you recognize signs of distress related to your absence, do not delay in contacting your veterinarian for an examination and possibly a referral to a veterinary behaviorist. Separation-related problems can be treated, but the outcome is most favorable when they are treated without delay.

Keep a journal so you can easily recall and report important observations about your dog's behavior, both as you prepare to leave the house and while you are away. Provide videos of your dog's behavior when he is alone. All this information will be used to establish a diagnosis and create an appropriate, customized treatment plan.

While you wait for your appointment, avoid leaving your dog alone. Dog walkers, daycares, pet sitters, or working from home are some of the emergency options available. If you come home to find your dog has soiled or chewed something, do not scold him. Remember, he is already distressed — being scolded will only increase underlying anxiety. Many dogs that exhibit separation-related behaviors improve greatly with treatment. Treatment usually includes behavior modification, but also can include medication to address the emotional response to being left alone and speed up healing.

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