

SCARED TO BE HOME ALONE

The term “Separation Anxiety” is a pretty mild label for a devastating and destructive behavior that can result in human frustration, anger, sometimes even the euthanasia of an offending dog when a despairing owner reaches her wits’ end. If you’ve 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, you’re probably familiar with the term. 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 personal dog, or at least had a dog-owning friend whose canine companion reportedly suffered from this difficult disorder.

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.” Common signs of the condition 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
- will 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. Given the vital importance of a dog’s canine companions, it speaks volumes about their 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. 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.

Differential Diagnoses

Another reason separation anxiety *seems* so prevalent these days compared to 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 the cause could also be incomplete housetraining, lack of access to appropriate elimination areas with 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 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.: 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 Sidebar: Case Study #1)

If elimination accidents occur when the owner is home as well as when the dog is left alone, it's more likely a housetraining problem than a separation issue. 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.

A Continuum

Distress over being left alone is not always a full-blown separation anxiety problem. A dog may suffer from mild to severe *isolation* distress or anxiety or mild to severe *separation* distress or anxiety.

The difference between distress and anxiety is a matter of degree on a continuum. "Distress" indicates a lower intensity of stress behaviors when the dog is alone, while "anxiety" is an extreme panic attack. This 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 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 we are out cleaning the barn, it matters not to Missy that my husband is still there – if I go back to the house for some reason 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 Day Two 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 and whining. But it may explain why we’re at least her fifth (and final!) home.

Behavior Modification

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” 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. Be sure to end your exercise session 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”, WDJ October 2000).
- 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 5:00 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 are still in your bathrobe. Make the morning ritual 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.
- Use Comfort Zone (DAP) plug-ins and sprays in his environment to help ease his

anxiety. (See WDJ January 2004, “Please Appease Me”)

- 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. A good behavior professional can also 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.

SIDEBAR: PREVENTING SEPARATION ANXIETY

The most important ingredient in a successful Separation Anxiety Prevention Program is to set your dog up for success. When you bring a new dog or puppy home, implement a program to help him be comfortable with being alone for gradually increasing periods. This will help to assure him that it’s not necessary to panic – you haven’t abandoned him; you always come back. Be sure to exercise him well before you practice – a tired dog is a much-better candidate for relaxation than one who’s “full of it.” Here are the 10 steps of a two-day program to create a dog who is comfortable being left alone:

1. Bring your dog home at a time when someone can spend a few days with him to ease the stress of the transition.
2. Prepare a quiet, safe space in advance such as a playpen or puppy pen, or a dog-proofed room such as a laundry room. (See “Getting Off to the Best Start”, WDJ January 1999).
3. When you bring your dog home, give him a chance to relieve himself outdoors, and spend 10-15 minutes with him in the house under close supervision. Then put him in his pen and stay in the room with him.
4. Stay close at first. Read a book. If he fusses, ignore him. When he’s quiet, greet him calmly, take one step away, and then return before he has a chance to get upset. Speak to him calmly, then go back to reading. You’re teaching him that if you leave, you will return. Other family members should make themselves scarce during this time – your dog needs to learn to be *alone*.
5. Continue to occasionally step away, gradually increasing the distance and varying the length of time that you stay away, so that eventually you can wander around the room without upsetting your dog. Each time you return, greet him *calmly*. Every once in a while say “Yes!” in a calm but cheerful voice before you return to him, then walk back to the pen and feed him a treat.
6. After an hour or so, give him a break. Take him outside to potty and play. Hang out for a while. Then go back inside and resume his pen exercises.
7. Begin again, staying near the pen until he settles. More quickly this time, move along steps 4 and 5 until you can wander around the room without generating alarm. Now step into another room very briefly, and return before your dog has time to get upset. Gradually increase the length of time you stay

out of the room, interspersing it with wandering around the room, sitting near him reading a book, and sitting across the room, reading a book. If he starts to fuss, wait until he stops fussing to move back toward him. Teach him that calm behavior makes you return, fussing keeps you away.

8. Occasionally, step outside of the house. Your goal for day one is to get Buddy comfortable with you being away from him for 15 to 20 minutes. (It's usually the first 20 minutes of separation that are most difficult) Vary the times, so he doesn't start getting antsy in anticipation of your return. Remember to give him plenty of potty and play breaks: every hour for a young pup, every one to two hours for an older dog.
9. On Day 2, quickly go through the warm-up steps again, until you can step outside for 15-20 minutes at a time, interspersed with shorter separations. On one of your outdoor excursions, hop into your car and drive around the block. Return in 5-10 minutes, and calmly re-enter the house just as you have been during the rest of the exercises. Hang out for a while, then go outside and drive away again, for a half-hour this time.
10. Now it's time for Sunday brunch. Be sure your dog gets a thorough potty break and play time, then give him fifteen minutes to relax after the stimulation of play. Put his favorite stuffed Kong into his pen, round up the family, and calmly exit the house for an outing of a couple of hours' duration. When you arrive home to a calm and happy dog, drink an orange juice toast to your graduation from Separation Anxiety Prevention School.

**Note – If you are modifying an already existing distress or anxiety condition you will need to work through the steps of the program much more slowly.*

Graduate School

It's unfair to ask a young dog to stay home alone for eight to ten hours – he needs to get out to relieve himself midway through the day. If you force him to soil the house, at worst you can cause stress-related behaviors, at best you may create housetraining problems. Options may include taking him to work with you, having family members come home on their lunch hour, arranging for stay-at-home neighbors to take him out, hiring a pet walker to walk him and play with him, or sending him to a well-run doggie daycare environment. (*Note – the daycare option is not appropriate for a very young pup.*)

If you set up a routine to help your dog succeed, he'll someday earn his Master's Degree in Home Alone, and be trusted with full house freedom. It may be too late for some dog owners to say they've never had a dog with Separation Anxiety, but it's never too late to say "never again."

SIDEBAR – CASE STUDY: MISDIAGNOSIS

Lexi was a five-year-old spayed female Husky/Greyhound mix in rescue, presented by the foster mom as having separation anxiety that manifested as destructive behavior. Lexi had been in several prior foster homes, none of which reported destructive behavior.

As we discussed Lexi's behavior during her behavior consultation, the dog paced almost constantly, and displayed numerous other signs of general stress, including whining, attention-seeking and exploring doorways, even though her current human was sitting quietly in a chair in the center of the room. Her behavior did not change significantly when her human left the room.

The foster parent mentioned that she had noted a heightened anxiety when Lexi heard "mystery electronic beeping" in the house – probably from a watch hidden in a

drawer that the owners were unable to locate. She also reportedly reacted badly to the beeps of other watches, cameras, and other electronic devices.

I concluded that while Lexi did, indeed, have anxiety problems, they were not separation-related but rather a more generalized anxiety. While we have no way of knowing for sure, I surmised that at some point she may have been contained in an underground shock fence, and the beeping sounds that caused her heightened anxiety were similar to the warning beep of the fence. For a dog who has been trained to such a fence, the sound of the beep, through association with the shock, can be every bit as aversive and stress-causing as the shock itself.

We implemented a behavior modification program for generalized anxiety that included partnering with a veterinarian for the administration of anti-anxiety medication, and the foster parent made sure not to leave Lexi alone with access to the room where the mystery beeping occurred (the kitchen). Lexi was eventually adopted and is doing well in her new home, where her owners are continuing her behavior modification program.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Take steps to prevent separation anxiety in your new dog by conditioning him to accept being left alone.
2. Carefully assess separation anxiety type behaviors (destructive behavior, vocalization, and inappropriate elimination) to determine if the behaviors might have a cause other than separation anxiety,
3. Understand that your dog's difficult behavior is not deliberate, and that punishment is ineffective, inappropriate and will only exacerbate the behavior.
4. Read Patricia McConnell's booklet, "I'll Be Home Soon," for more information on separation anxiety.

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