

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

The goal of this handout is to help you understand separation anxiety and give you tips and tricks to help your dog feel less anxious when home alone. Please do not hesitate to call to make an appointment to discuss separation anxiety and potential treatment options with your vet.

What is separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a common behavior in dogs, with 22-55% of dogs affected. It often manifests itself in destructive behaviors, such as chewing at doors and cages, vocalization, and house soiling (urinating and defecating inside the house/crate). However, there are many different underlying causes of separation anxiety in dogs which manifest with different behaviors:

1. Exit frustration
 - Associated behaviors: chewing at doors, vocalizing, destruction
2. Redirective reactive
 - Associated behaviors: destruction, barking at things outside
3. Redirective inhibitive
 - Associated behaviors: Barking at things outside, but is NOT destructive
4. Boredom
 - Associated behaviors: more reactive to external events (such as cars going by) because no other stimulations

A normal dog, without separation anxiety, spends most of its time alone being passive. This means that there is no whining, barking, and they are not actively observing their environment. A dog with separation anxiety spends its time being active with barking, observing the environment, pacing, and whining. Dogs with separation anxiety exhibit other associated behaviors when their owners are present. These include:

- Shadowing their owners/following them around the house
- Anxiety during the departure routine (lip licking, yawning, panting)

- Excessive enthusiasm upon owner arrival (lasts longer than 2-3 minutes, more extreme than normal)

What if it's not separation anxiety?

If your dog is exhibiting the behaviors listed above, there is a good chance they have separation anxiety. However, there are other options that your vet will consider. If they are urinating in the house, we will want to rule out a urinary tract infection or an issue with training. Other considerations are things like noise phobia and aggression. We will often recommend bloodwork and a urinalysis when working up a separation anxiety case, to make sure there are no other underlying diseases and to make sure they are healthy enough to go on any medications that we may end up prescribing.

My dog has separation anxiety, what now?

Once we are sure that your dog has separation anxiety, we will work with behavioral training techniques and prescription medicines to help your dog feel more comfortable at home alone. A video camera is a great diagnostics tool, since it allows us to measure whether or not our treatments have been successful. Fortunately, these days there are tons of different options for video cameras, from ones that you can watch live or simply record to watch later, and there are many options at a reasonable price.

With separation anxiety, a big consideration is whether or not you should use a crate. Confinement can make separation anxiety worse. However, there can still be anxiety when outside of the crate that needs to be addressed. If the dog gets worse when in a crate, you can try restricting access to certain areas or to a single room.

Play white noise. This will help muffle sounds outside of the house. The "Dohm" white noise machines are recommended. You can also layer music on top of the white noise. "Through A Dog's Ear" is a great option for music, as it was developed with the help of a veterinary neurologist to specifically calm and relax your dog. This album can be found on Spotify or purchased from Amazon.

Keep departures and arrivals as low key as possible. Stop interacting with your dog for at least 10-15 minutes before you leave, so the act of leaving isn't so traumatic. When getting home, wait to interact with your dog until they have had the chance to calm down.

Do not punish them, even if they have caused damage or destruction. Punishing animals after the fact is not helpful from a training standpoint, as they do not know what they are getting

punished for. It also adds to more conflict, as they are excited to see you come home, but then immediately get punished.

Offer food at departures. This will help to distract your dog from your departure and creates a good association with your departure. Offering food also helps us measure how anxious your dog is, since severely anxious dogs won't eat the treat until you get back home.

Reinforce relaxation. This is best done with the help of a veterinary behaviorist, as it is a long and complicated protocol. The general idea is to reinforce the behavior of relaxation in your dog. This can be started by dropping a treat by your dog when your dog is relaxing. You can also try to teach them to relax on a certain bed or blanket, so that they can find comfort on that spot.

The full protocol can be found online at

http://caninebehavior.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Protocol_for_Relaxation-_Karen_Overall.pdf.

Medications. Fluoxetine and clomipramine are two antidepressants we can use daily to help dogs with separation anxiety. For the best results we combine antidepressants with behavioral training. These antidepressants can also be combined with anxiety relief drugs that we use as needed, such as prior to departure. For these medications, we give a dose 1-2 hours prior to departure, for an added level of anxiety relief. These medications include Clomidine, Trazodone, and Alprazolam.

When to refer to a veterinary behaviorist?

While we will help to the best of our ability to help you and your dog with their separation anxiety, sometimes we will want to refer to a veterinary behaviorist. Veterinary behaviorists are not trainers. They are veterinarians who specialize in behavior, so are better suited to treat separation anxiety which is a behavioral issue and not a training issue, than dog trainers. If at any point you are at risk of eviction or being fined due to your dogs vocalization or destructive behaviors, if your dog is causing severe destruction to your property or trauma to itself, or if we treat with no improvement, then we will refer you to a veterinary behaviorist.