

DEALING WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY

Separation anxiety can be a tough problem to deal with for you and your dog. There are several things that may trigger a response of separation anxiety in your dog, including the following:

- when a dog who is accustomed to constant human companionship is suddenly left alone for the first time;
- when a change in the routine or family structure occurs;
- following a long period of time when the dog and his owner were constantly together;
- or following a traumatic event.



Common behaviours occurring from separation anxiety include chewing, digging and scratching at windows or doors; urination and defecation resulting from stress; and barking, crying and howling. It's important to remember that your dog's separation anxiety behaviour is part of a panic response, one that he can't help. For that reason, punishment simply will not work.

Some short term solutions can involve leaving your pet with a friend or relative or a boarding kennel. Another temporary measure can involve anti-anxiety medication, though be sure to consult with your veterinarian first. If, however, you're interested in more long-term solutions, you do have options.

One exercise that can help with separation anxiety and is fairly easy to execute is to practice sit-stay and down-stay commands using positive reinforcement. This gradually teaches your dog that he can remain calmly in one place while you're elsewhere. You want to say the command then move briefly out of your dog's sight, gradually increasing the distance and time that you are away from your dog. On your return, use positive reinforcement by gently praising him or giving him a treat. Diced chicken works wonders. Or try Chunkers, available from the refrigerated dog food section in your supermarket. Make sure you use something completely different from his normal dinner food so it is a real treat. These exercises can easily be incorporated into your normal routine, for instance when you get up to go into another room.

If you're dealing with a fairly minor case of separation anxiety there are several other things that you can do. First, try leaving your dog with an article of your clothing that has your scent on it. Also, keep all of your departures and arrivals low-key. In fact experts recommend that you actually ignore your pet for the first few minutes when you arrive home, then calmly pet him. Get him to sit and reward him with a treat. You can also establish a cue that you use every time you leave your dog on short absences. This can be a word or action, something like 'be right back' or the presentation of a chew toy that should be used during practice sessions. However, avoid using this cue when you'll be gone for longer periods of time.

You could also try giving your dog a large meaty bone or a kong with a weak beef broth soup frozen inside it before leaving the house. This will keep him occupied for a good hour or so, and he will gradually start to associate your departure as being a positive event (getting a treat) rather than being something to be anxious about.

For more severe cases of separation anxiety, you can do all of the above techniques combined with a process of desensitisation meant to get your dog used to being alone. This process should begin with your normal departure activities, things that your dog recognizes like getting the keys or putting on your shoes. Do these normal activities, but then sit back down. Repeat this exercise until your dog does not respond to your actions with distress.

You then want to gradually increase what it is that you're doing. The next step is to do your normal departure activities but then go to the door, open it, then sit back down. After that, increase what you're doing so that you actually step outside, leaving the door open, then return and sit back down. Finally, increase it so that you step outside, close the door, then immediately return and sit back down. Slowly increase the amount of time that you're outside so that you get your dog accustomed to being alone and being calm.

The key here is to proceed very gradually from step to step. You should not go forward a step until your dog shows no signs of distress with what you are doing. If your actions do produce anxiety, you've likely gone too fast and need to return to the earlier step. How long it will take you or how many times you need to repeat each step will vary. It will take patience and commitment on your behalf to see this through.

You can start practicing short absences once your dog has learned to tolerate your being outside for several seconds. Start with a minute away and practice as many absences less than ten minutes as possible. You can practice several of these in one session, and also practice some short-duration absences scattered throughout the day. Every time that you return, keep your return low-key. Your goal should be to get your dog to handle short absences between thirty and ninety minutes in length. Once that has been accomplished, you can start to try some longer absences.

There are some things that simply won't help with separation anxiety. Punishment should never be used and crating is not recommended. Getting another pet as a companion usually doesn't work either. What can work, however, is lots of patience and understanding.

