

Separation Anxiety

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Undoubtedly if you have recently rescued a dog, he will exhibit some signs of separation anxiety. The split from their original pack, often coupled with stays in animal shelters or as homeless pups, then to a foster home and finally to your home, can cause them to be anxious when you leave home without them. One of the most common errors when adopting a new pet is to take time off from work or adopt on a Friday and spend the entire weekend getting the new pet acclimated. Then Monday evening the owners return home after an 8 hour workday to a house in shreds, a confused dog and no idea that their good intentions of spending lots of time with the new dog contributed to the disarray. About 4% of our 54 million companion canines suffer from Separation Anxiety in the US.

Signs of Anxiety:

Pacing, Panting, Drooling, Dilated Pupils, Whining, Barking/Howling, Destructive Chewing, Panic Elimination, Appetite Suppression, Digging at Entrances or Exits

Causes of Anxiety:

- 1) Personality-“Velcro Dogs”
- 2) Traumatic Separation-Most Common in Rescue or Re-homed Dogs
- 3) Trauma When Alone-Scary Incident When Owner is Gone
- 4) Dogs Who Have Never Been Alone-common in Greyhounds
- 5) True Separation Anxiety=Panic Attack in Humans; very few cases of true SA

Possible Techniques to Alleviate Mild Separation Anxiety:

1) If you have just adopted a new dog, throw them right into your routine. They are most comfortable with consistency, and they will appreciate a regular day to day schedule. This is very important with rescued dogs, since they have reason to be anxious. Since this may be their second, third or fourth home, they have no reason to believe that you are coming back when you leave. Do not block out 2 or 3 days straight to spend with your dog and then leave the house for 8 hours on Day 4 as they will certainly experience some anxiety. Come and go as you normally would, allowing them to realize that you will return each time. Read on for more tips.

2) Be very mindful of your arrivals and departures ~ it needs to be like a disappearance and reappearance with VERY CALM tones of voice, no eye contact, ignoring the cries and barks, etc. You can also just start to ignore about 5 minutes before you leave the house and ignore for 5 after you return. It is no big deal that you are leaving, and no big deal that you have returned. The dog needs to feel safe whether you are home or not. You can fake your departure to start getting him accustomed to the cues by picking up keys, putting on shoes, sitting back down for coffee, keys up, sunglasses on, keys down, sunglasses off, shoes off, etc. Weekends are great for this type of exercise. Keep a lateral eye on him to see if he is getting less anxious as you mix up your departure cues. Remember, they know tone of voice and body language. He knows the difference between the work wardrobe and the weekend wardrobe, deck shoes from penny loafers. This process is called desensitizing, working on the emotions of the dog, whereas operant conditioning works on training the dog through obedience. You are desensitizing him to your departure cues to lessen his anxiety.

3) Get a Kong for all of your dogs, stuff them with peanut butter or cream cheese or liverwurst (just a dab, not literally stuffed) and freeze it overnight. This should be given right before you leave to bridge your departure. You want him to think "Mom's leaving-excellent!" What is the biggest thing you could give him to make him want you to leave the house? The bridge works magic because they do not actually watch you walk out the door, since they are busy with their tasty treat. When finished you have gone and they decide maybe to take a nap. This is called counter conditioning, when you teach them to associate something really great with your departure. You are reprogramming his association with your departure from something traumatic to something pleasant.

4) Ignore him 50% of the time when you are home. If he follows you room to room, just look right through him. He needs to learn that he is safe whether you are home or not. If you watch a dog pack, the alpha can choose to play when invited, or choose not to play – it's entirely up to the alpha since they are in charge.

5) Begin obedience training now to build his confidence. If he's more confident, he will feel more secure. Keep him busy, make him work for everything! Most dogs should be working for many hours per day; instead he's a house pet. Intellectual stimulation helps tire them out; tired dogs are good dogs.

6) Crate train your pup so that he has a safe space to stay when you are out. It is very dangerous for them to have free reign, where they can chew and ingest electrical cords, hard plastics and other non digestible items which cause unnecessary expensive trips to the vet. Dogs are den animals so the crate is very comfortable for them (note many dogs will crawl under the coffee table, bed or computer desk for a nap-same idea as a den). The dog needs to learn that the crate = feeling good/good things happen. Dogs learn to love their crates, and they are then prepared for a long car ride, stay at the vet's office or an overnight at a doggy camp. If you have a small space that can be gated off for him to stay, creating a den-like area, that is appropriate as well. Baby gates run about \$25. At the big box stores and can be used when they need time out or just need their space (lots of visitors). *Note: Crates are not usually the answer for extreme cases of SA.

7) Depending on the age of the dog, teeth only set permanently in the gums between 10-12 months old. He still needs to chew a fair amount. Dogs use their muzzles in ways that humans use their hands-imagine trying to keep your hands still all day long! Exercise the pup as much as possible. Try a red laser toy from Petco (about \$7.) – my collie/shepherd mix and the two cattle dogs LOVE this game (my Rottweiler sits back with her paws up and laughs at the silly dogs-she has no interest:) The laser toy is beautiful since you don't really have to move-you can go in the backyard after dusk when it's cool and just move that wrist. Kids can play this with the dog... Products to discourage chewing, such as bitter apple, are not effective. If needed you can put upside down plastic runners with the nubbies sticking up in front of objects that you don't want him getting to – they hate the way those feel on their paws. Two-sided tape is a good aversive too depending on the chosen object.

8) Fans and radios may or may not calm the dog, but they certainly create “white noise” which blocks out exterior noises which may cause them anxiety or to alarm bark. A classical or jazz station (ask the dog which they prefer) will serve as a consistent cue for them each day when you depart.

9) Most, but not all, dogs will show signs of calming after just a few days of consistent practice with these steps. **The good news is that the average case of SA is completely resolves within 6-8 weeks.** There is a Bach's Flower Essences Rescue Remedy (sold at Whole Foods for about \$15/bottle) which is a natural stress and trauma reliever for humans and animals. There are some dogs that may need prescribed anti-anxiety medication (like Clomicalm) in conjunction with the behavior modification in order to see results. Consult your veterinarian for more information.

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