

Dog 101

Dealing with Separation Anxiety



Does your dog destroy the house when you leave, or act like you left him alone in a strange place when you get back? He may have separation anxiety.

Signs of separation anxiety

Dogs with separation anxiety exhibit distress and behavior problems when they're left alone. Here are some of the most common examples:

- Digging and scratching at doors or windows attempting to reunite with their owners
- Destructive chewing
- Howling, barking, and whining
- Urination and defecation (even with otherwise house-trained dogs)

What causes separation anxiety?

It's not fully understood why some dogs suffer from separation anxiety and others don't. But remember, your dog's behaviors are part of a panic response. Your dog isn't trying to punish you; they just want you to come home. These are some of the scenarios that can trigger separation anxiety:

- Being left alone for the first time
- Being left alone when accustomed to constant human contact
- Suffering a traumatic event, such as time at a shelter or boarding kennel
- Change in the family's routine or structure, or the loss of a family member or other pet

How to treat minor separation anxiety

- Don't make a big deal out of arrivals and departures
- Leave your dog with recently worn clothes that smell like you
- Establish a word or action that you use every time you leave that tells your dog you'll be back
- Talk to your vet about using over-the-counter calming products

How to handle more severe problems

Use the techniques outlined above along with desensitization training. Teach your dog the sit-stay and down-stay commands using positive reinforcement. This training will help them learn that they can remain calmly and happily in one place while you go to another room. Create a "safe place" to limit your dog's ability to be destructive while you're away. A safe place should:

- Confine the dog loosely (a room with a window and toys, not total isolation)
- Contain busy toys for distraction
- Have dirty laundry to lend a calming scent cue or other safety cues

How to cope while your dog learns to be calm

It can take time for your dog to unlearn their panic response to your departures. To help you and your dog cope in the short term, consider the following interim solutions:

- Ask your veterinarian about drug therapy to reduce their overall anxiety
- If your dog gets along with other dogs, try a doggie daycare when you have to be away
- Leave your dog with a friend, family member, or neighbor when you're away
- If allowed, take your dog to work with you

What won't help

- **Punishment.** Punishment isn't effective for treating separation anxiety and can make the situation worse.
- **Obedience training.** While formal training is always a good idea, separation anxiety isn't the result of disobedience or lack of training. If you need more assistance resolving your dog's issues, consult an animal behavior specialist or veterinarian.