

Separation Anxiety

Since dogs are pack animals, it's not surprising when a dog experiences anxiety at being left alone. With the right help, most dogs can learn to remain alone calmly for reasonable lengths of time. Conditioning a dog to be able to do this is a real kindness that makes the dog's life more comfortable.

What is Separation Anxiety and What Isn't?

A dog going through a normal stage of chewing to help the teeth properly develop is not experiencing separation anxiety. Leaving the dog alone with a houseful of temptations to ease the tooth discomfort is a recipe for disaster. A dog having housetraining accidents when the dog was never fully housetrained or because the dog is being required to hold it for longer than the dog can do so is not separation anxiety.

When the first chewing stage is over and the pup seems housetrained, people tend to think it's time to leave the pup alone loose in the house. Typically this might be around 5 to 7 months of age. A little time goes by, and suddenly the dog starts destructive chewing. This is due to normal tooth development, but you can turn it into separation anxiety if you handle it badly.

Be prepared for an immature dog to need a lot of help from you to develop proper chewing habits. Don't leave the dog unsupervised in the presence of things that are valuable to you or things that could harm a chewing dog, until the dog is truly ready. This comes after you've helped the dog develop reliable habits of always going for dog toys to chew and never for people stuff. It also requires some maturity in the dog, often age two years for larger breeds.

How to Give Your Pup or New Dog a Good Start

Getting your dog used to being alone without anxiety ideally begins in puppyhood. The pup's breeder may have started the process by using crates to get each pup in the litter first used to sleeping in a crate along with other pups, and eventually sleeping alone in a crate. The crate time is integrated into the pup's schedule so physical needs are met and the pup will not feel the need to go to the bathroom while crated. A foundation with the crate is more likely with top breeders who keep their pups longer and provide early socialization and training before placing them in homes. Such pups have had an excellent start in life.

Whether or not the pup has had prior conditioning to the crate, the first night in your home means the added stress of the pup being away from the canine and human family that has represented safety. It's no wonder pups tend to make so much noise when left alone, calling out for someone to come and save them. After all, being left alone in the wild would mean death to a pup.

Puppies come with a full set of instincts that are refined by their experiences into the instincts that will become strongest in their adult lives. If you want to encourage the instinct of screaming for someone to come whenever the dog is left alone, just keep running to the pup every time the pup screams! Soon you will have created a pup who pitches a fit when left alone.

If you wait and wait while the pup screams and screams, and then you finally go to the pup, you have now created a pup who will scream even more persistently-because the pup has learned that you need a lot of screaming to get you to come, but you will eventually come. So, screaming for a long time pays. To avoid this problem, do NOT go to a pup who is in the act of making noise. Always wait until the pup is quiet before you go to the pup.

You can ease a pup's conditioning to a crate by putting the crate in the room with a person while the pup gets used to sleeping in it. Ideally, crate time will be time the pup needs to rest anyway. Dogs sleep 14 or more hours a day. A crate needs to be the dog's safe, relaxing haven, not a prison. The schedule will determine which it is.

Separation anxiety and extreme stress over being crated are highly likely in a dog who is confined to a crate for an abusive amount of time. Once this has been done, especially repeatedly, it is not always possible to rehabilitate the dog and make it able to rest calmly in a crate, so it's important not to make this mistake.

Don't ask a pup to hold it for longer than the number of hours equaling the pup's age in months plus one. In other words, at 8 weeks, your pup needs someone to come home within 3 hours (two months plus one) to give the pup a potty break. At any age, make the top limit 8 hours.

Some dogs will never physically be able to hold it even 8 hours. Some will make it longer, but every time you ask a dog to do that, you're taking a big risk of creating future separation anxiety. When you are home and awake, take the dog out often (at least once per hour until housetraining is complete), so that the dog's elimination processes can make up for the lost time.

Leaving the pup with desirable toys helps reduce the risk of separation anxiety, too. Different dogs find different toys desirable. A pup may do well with three toys, offering a variety of chewing textures. Do your best to screen each item for safety with your particular pup before leaving the pup alone with it. If all goes well, your pup will be learning to

chew appropriate items to satisfy chewing needs, learning to accept time alone calmly, and developing the physical ability to hold bowels and bladder for housetraining, all at the same time.

Pups and dogs need conditioning to separation from other dogs in the family. Keeping two dogs always together is not good for their long-term mental health. If you have multiple dogs, take each of them away from the other with you away from the home regularly. This will usually avoid the problem of a dog who experiences intense stress when separated from a dog packmate. Since such separations are unavoidable at times, it's a great kindness to condition your dogs be able to handle them comfortably. It will also make managing your dogs much easier through the years.

Your Comings and Goings

With any age dog, you can do a lot to prevent separation anxiety, and to cure it once it occurs, by leaving the house calmly whenever you go, and coming home calmly whenever you return. This is difficult for many people to do. Perhaps you feel guilty about leaving your dog alone. So you go out the door with a big emotional farewell. Or maybe you're worried about what the dog might do while you're gone, so you try a stern word in advance. Either way, you've just added anxiety to the dog's experience of your leaving. Resist the temptation. Instead, calmly walk out the door. The same problems happen in reverse when people come home; only this is the most emotionally loaded time, the time that causes the most problems. First, people love that insanely wild greeting dogs give. If you encourage this insanity, here's what you get: a scratched door, damaged window treatments, a dog who may attack another dog, cat, or home furnishings when you're just a little slower to get the door open, and a dog who is more prone to separation anxiety.

Is it worth messing up your dog just so you can get the ego boost of the dog acting like you're the greatest person in the world in the craziest possible way? There are other ways a dog can show love and respect for you that are healthy. Come into your house quietly, and help your dog learn that your homecomings are normal, not reasons to go bonkers.

The second mistake people make when they return home is to punish—even scolding is punishment to a dog—for something that happened while they were gone. Now the dog is going to both anticipate and dread your return home. And your punishment will have taught the dog NOTHING, except to fear and distrust your reactions. The dog's submissive posture when faced with an angry owner convinces people that the dog "knows what he did wrong." No, the dog does NOT know. The dog knows you're angry, and does what dogs do to try to pacify an angry pack leader: the dog submits.

Avoid this guaranteed method of creating separation anxiety in your dog by leaving the dog in the proper situation where damage is not going to happen. Either confine the dog to a safe area, or confine your stuff where the dog can't reach it.

Changes

Separation anxiety often results from changes in a dog's life. A dog adopted from rescue or a shelter who has experienced traumatic changes of homes is a strong candidate for separation anxiety.

A family moving with the dog to a new home can trigger separation anxiety, especially if the move includes a change in the dog's routine. A change in routine can trigger separation anxiety without moving, too, particularly if the new routine does not adequately meet the dog's needs. One example would be a new household schedule that results in the dog having to wait too long between potty trips. It's so easy to overlook a seemingly unimportant part of your routine that in actuality is essential for the dog.

Having a human or animal family member move out of the house, or a new one move in, can also trigger separation anxiety. Part of the reason can be the resulting change in the dog's routine. People may be treating the dog differently, too. Try to break down the dog's needs and schedule, and see what has changed, and how you might be able to improve it to better provide for the dog.

Severe Cases

Severe separation anxiety might be defined as a dog who is physically suffering. Sadly, you can create this situation by such human behaviors as going to your puppy in response to noise. The pup can become conditioned to virtually never give up screaming and clawing to get you to come, even when you won't be home for hours.

Whatever the cause, dogs have hurt themselves badly "fighting" a crate in this manner. Dogs have also jumped through glass windows, ripped doors apart, broken into houses, and repeatedly jumped fences and run from the property.

Some dogs lose bladder and bowel control. This is understandable when you realize that instead of having the benefits of physical processes that quiet bowels and bladder during sleep—what happens when a dog rests calmly in a crate—the anxious dog is not only awake, but upset. If you come home and scold for damage or housetraining messes, the dog will be even more anxious the next time. This is a truly vicious cycle that many people fall into with their suffering dogs.

At the point where the dog is suffering, it can be advisable to get help for your dog from a veterinary prescription for medication to help with separation anxiety. Don't expect miracles from medication. Without the proper behavior modification-human as well as canine-the medication is unlikely to work for the long term.

The goal is to use the medication on a temporary basis to relieve the dog's suffering and help the dog relax enough to benefit from the behavior modification the people provide. You will likely need the help of a behavior specialist to develop the program of behavior modification that fits your family. A veterinary behavior specialist can both prescribe medication and provide you with a behavior modification program. Your regular veterinarian can help you find a specialist, if you need one.

Behavior Remedies

To help a dog develop the ability to remain alone comfortably, the dog also needs to be comfortable when the people ARE home. This means a well-ordered life including the right exercise, training, feeding schedule, grooming, bonding with the family, bathroom schedule, medical care, and the sundry other things that dogs require.

Some cases of separation anxiety happen because the family truly cannot provide for the dog's basic needs. If this is the case with your situation, remember it's not the dog's fault. Seek help first through the source from which you got your dog-responsible breeder, rescue, shelter. There is often a lot more support available than you would ever imagine.

Done right, training helps a dog develop the confidence to remain calmly alone. Training also improves your bond with your dog, making the dog feel more secure that your home is permanent. This kind of training includes structure, and taking the dog away from the home to train and to practice. The outings are important in bonding the dog with you. There is also something about going OUT with you and coming BACK with you repeatedly that seems to help the dog work through the fears. A good, positive-method training class can work well, unless the dog or person has special needs. In that case, look for a good private trainer.

Conditioning the dog to rest calmly in a crate can take time. Keys can be short periods in the crate and giving treats while in the crate. Until the dog is comfortable in the crate, it's essential not to confine the dog to the crate too long and trigger a panic that would undo all your good conditioning.

It also helps to leave your home and return in a short time, over and over, until the dog gets used to your comings and goings. The dog is picking up the pattern that when you leave, you will come back. Remember to keep all your comings and goings CALM.

Do take care of your dog's food, water, and potty needs before and after your absences, but avoid high emotion in the ways you do this. For example, don't take the dog for an intense and exhilarating exercise session, dash home, drop off the dog, and leave. You want the dog calm at the time you leave, not all wound up.

Similarly, if you must potty the dog immediately on returning home because of how long the dog has been alone, keep the outing low-key. Postpone feeding for at least a few minutes after your return. Remember that you don't want the dog wildly anticipating your return, and food is pretty darned important to most dogs. Feed your dog at least twice a day, so that one meal doesn't assume too much importance. This also reduces some health risks, such as seizure from low blood sugar, and gastric torsion from eating too much, too fast.

It helps some anxious dogs if you calmly present the dog with a special toy containing food, just as you leave. The idea is for the dog to wind down while enjoying this, and then sack out until you get home. A Kong toy with peanut butter inside can be a good choice.

Sometimes people try to solve separation anxiety by getting another dog as a companion for the anxious one. The result can be two dogs with separation anxiety, and the potential of a real wrecking crew! The best course with behavior problems is usually to work through one dog's problems before adding another dog to the home. The dog that has developed separation anxiety after the loss of a long-time dog companion can sometimes benefit from having another dog join the family. If the dog and the family are truly ready for another dog, and the right dog is selected, this does sometimes work.

Looking at things from a dog's point of view is a great help in coping with separation anxiety. Sometimes it requires detective work to discover what is lacking in the dog's care. This effort always pays off in a better life for both people and dogs.