



# Separation Anxiety

Dogs are very social animals that want to be in a “pack” 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Dogs can learn to be alone for moderate periods of time but it often doesn’t come naturally and some dogs develop anxiety.

In severe cases, a dog can have canine panic attacks. However, many separation-related problems can be solved with schedule adjustments, more activities for your dog, and careful training.

## Causes

Separation-related problems are often triggered by some sort of life change.

- Losing her home and going into a shelter
- Going to a new home
- Staying at a boarding kennel
- Losing a key family member (human, canine, or even feline)
- Major change in routine

Symptoms to look for include extreme barking or whining, going to the bathroom in the house, and destruction.

## Is it definitely separation anxiety?

A dog that barks or destroys things while left alone might do it because he’s frustrated, bored, or isn’t having his social or exercise needs met. A dog that goes to the bathroom in the house could have a medical issue. Make sure to rule these out with your vet before diagnosing separation anxiety.

## Practice is key.

Puppies and newly adopted dogs are at higher risk of developing separation-related problems. People often give all of their time and attention when she first comes home, and then are suddenly gone when it is time to go back to work. It is much better to leave for brief periods (from just a few seconds to a few minutes) many times during the first few days so that your dog learns quickly that when you leave, it’s no big deal and you always come back.

Another thing you can do is to teach a “safety cue” - a word or action that you use **every** time you leave that tells your dog you’ll be back. Dogs usually learn to associate certain cues with short absences by their owners. For example, when you take out the garbage, your dog knows you come right back and doesn't become anxious.



Some examples of safety cues are: turning on the radio; turning on the TV; a bone; or a toy (one that doesn’t have dangerous fillings and can’t be torn into pieces). Use your safety cue during practice sessions to teach your dog it means you’ll be back.

## Break up the day.

A normal workday for humans is a long long long time for a dog. Consider hiring a dog walker or taking your dog to doggie day care - this breaks up your dog's day and leaves him nice and tired when you get home.

## Exercise mind and body.

Give your dog both physical and mental exercise. Not only does problem solving increase confidence and independence, it is mentally tiring and therefore increases the likelihood your dog will rest quietly when left alone. Teach her to play hide-and seek with his toys, teach her tricks, get her involved in a sport like flyball or agility, let her play with other dogs, feed her all her meals in KONG® toys or other food-dispensing toys, or teach her how to play fetch and tug. The more activities and toys are incorporated into her life, the less she will depend on human social contact as sole stimulation.

## Severe Separation Anxiety

Sever separation anxiety is a serious and heart-breaking disorder. Dogs who suffer from separation anxiety experience the canine equivalent of panic attacks every time they are left alone. They might urinate, defecate, bark and cry, lose interest in any food left for them, and frantically scratch and chew at doorframes in an attempt to get out to find their owners.

It's important to understand that these dogs are not getting back at their owners for leaving or behaving the way they do out of spite or anger. Rather, they are filled with terror at being left alone. To them, it's a matter of survival.

A program of "systematic desensitization" can help many of these dogs.

1. Start your normal activities that signal you're getting ready to leave: getting your keys, putting on your coat, etc. Then just sit down and relax. Repeat this step until your dog does not react.
2. Do your normal activities that signal you're getting ready to leave, then go to the door. Open it, then sit down and relax. Repeat this step until your dog does not react.
3. Do your normal activities that signal you're getting ready to leave, open the door, then step outside, leaving the door open. Then go back in to sit down and relax. Repeat this step until your dog does not react.
4. Finally, Do your normal activities that signal you're getting ready to leave, open the door, step outside, and close the door. Then immediately return.

Go very slowly from one step to the next, repeating each step until your dog doesn't react. If at any time your dog shows sign of anxiety, return to an earlier step in the process.

When your dog is okay with you being on the other side of the closed door for several seconds, begin short absences. Start with just 1 minute. When you return, act like it's no big deal: either ignore your dog or greet her quietly and calmly. If she appears anxious, wait until she relaxes to repeat the exercise. Gradually stretch the amount of time you're gone.

Usually once your dog can handle short absences of 30-90 minutes, she can usually handle longer and you won't have to work up to all day absences minute by minute.

## Medication

Medication can help when the other suggestions can't. It can also help while you're working on the desensitization program. Consult your vet about whether this is a good option for your dog.

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