Separation Anxiety

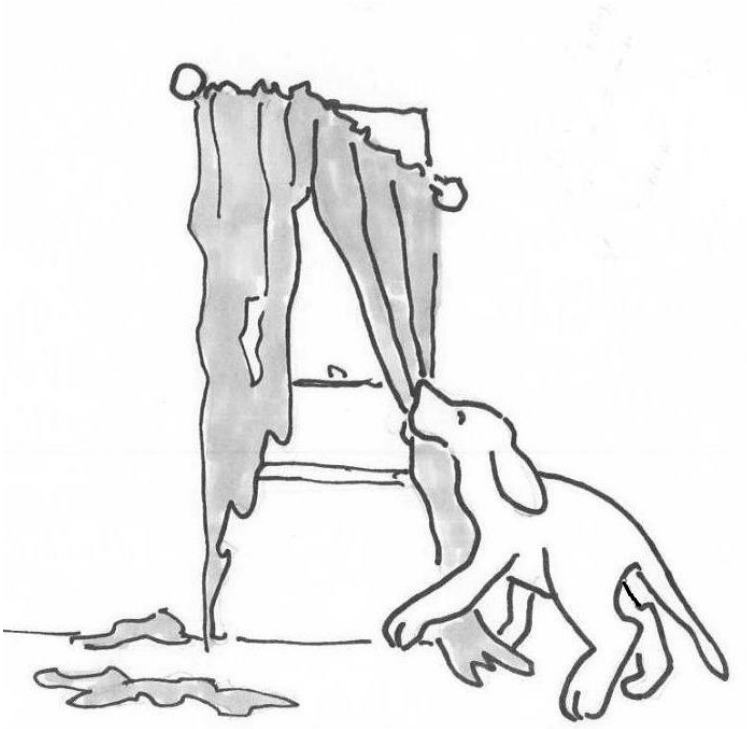
What is separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a condition where your dog suffers a panic attack because you, the guardian, have left the home. The destructive behavior that occurs when he is left alone causes considerable damage as he tries anything to get out and find you, his person.

What does separation anxiety look like?

A moderate to severe separation anxiety "attack" starts when your dog anticipates, with increasing signs of distress, your imminent departure. As you get ready to leave, your dog picks up the cues: she's putting on work shoes, picking up her purse, jingling the keys and reaching for the door! At this point, your dog is probably already showing signs of distress such as panting, drooling and/or pacing. When the door closes and you are gone, the anxiety morphs within minutes into a full blown panic attack. Your dog is afraid beyond all reason. He has one thought and one thought only—get out of here and find my person!

In his terror, he may pee and poop in the house, chew carpets and drapes and try to chew and claw through doors and windows in an effort to escape. He may actually break a window. He may bark or howl incessantly.



When you return, he is overcome with relief and greets you with "knockdown" enthusiasm—even if it was only an absence of a few minutes. As you go about household routines your dog will follow you from room to room, somewhat relaxed, but ever watchful for the cues that signal another departure, and so the cycle begins again. In reality, in these severe cases, the anxiety never really goes away, as your dog becomes more adept at noticing departure cues.

What causes separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety most likely is a combination of genetics (nature) and experiences (nurture). Some dog breeds are more prone to fearfulness; other dogs may have suffered a traumatic experience like abandonment. Or neither of these may be the case. Just like some people have a fear of heights, some dogs have a fear of alone time.

It is important to remember that if your dog suffers from separation anxiety, ***he has no control over what he does***. He does not pee or poop in your house or even on your bed because he is mad at you for leaving.

He is scared to death and in an absolute panic and is trying to get away from what is so scary – being left alone.

How can you tell if your dog has true separation anxiety?

Young dogs will chew things up when they are bored, so how do you know if it's really separation anxiety and not just boredom? The key is that when the guardian is present the destructive behaviors do not occur. It is only when the guardian is ***not*** present in the home that the panic and subsequent destruction occurs.

There are different levels of severity of separation anxiety. The symptoms of a **mild** case may include:

- Some intermittent barking. He may start and then stop and start up again later.
- Some pacing and whining before departure.
- Mild chewing of some guardian-related item—shoes, bedding.
- Excessive drooling or panting. You may notice drool puddles near doors or windows.
- Somewhat excessive greeting.

Symptoms of **moderate** to **severe** separation anxiety include:

- The dog may continuously bark, whine or howl after the guardian leaves. He may stop and start. There is often a pattern to the howling and barking.
- In most cases, the dog will not be interested in chew toys, food toys or any other food left for him.
- Most of the destruction is around perceived exits – doors, windows, curtains.
- The dog will defecate or urinate near doors and windows and possibly on the guardian's bed.
- The dog may develop lick sores on his paws, legs or flank from constant stress-induced licking.
- There is an over-the-top, excessive greeting when the guardian returns, even after a short absence.

A bored dog won't show the signs of distress signaled by the departure cues, he won't be in a panicked state of mind and he won't necessarily go after doors and windows. He will usually accept and enjoy chewing on a treat-filled toy when you leave. (Please see our ***Enrichment Toys*** handout.) Adequate exercise can also go a long way to solving the "boredom" issue.

Separation anxiety is a condition that needs to be treated. The dog will not get over it or outgrow it. If left untreated it will get worse. It can't be punished away. Shock or spray collars won't work.

The solution is the dog learns that being alone is not something to be afraid of. It is not a reason to panic. His person will return. He can survive. He can't learn this on his own. You have to teach him. It is a long, slow, and sometimes frustrating experience with ups and downs. But success can be attained.

Who can help?

Veterinarian: It is very important to have a good relationship with a veterinarian who is board certified to handle behavior issues in dogs. Severe cases of separation anxiety often benefit from medication.

Certified separation anxiety trainer: If your dog has separation anxiety, one of the most important steps you can take is to find a competent, licensed, professional trainer who specializes in separation anxiety. A

separation anxiety trainer will set up a program based on what your dog needs and, most importantly, will teach you what to do and how to read your dog's body language. She will be in regular contact with you—usually several times a week—helping you through rough spots and cheering you through progress.

How can I prepare for training?

Treatment for separation anxiety is slow and methodical. As with other canine fears, it's crucial to follow the dog's lead, not rush ahead on your own timeline. The program will have specific steps or phases which must be followed in sequence and requires considerable engagement from you, his guardian.

Time Commitment: The program requires a substantial time commitment that includes practice sessions with your dog five days a week, plus communication with your trainer each of those days. Expect the program duration to be no less than eight weeks, and often longer.

Training, Education, and Patience: You should also be open to letting your trainer educate you about proper training techniques, as well as lessons and readings on how to read your dog's body language. Yet even with the daily lessons and communication, progress can be very slow. Your trainer's knowledge and experience will be invaluable in helping you set up a training schedule and she will also provide you with emotional support and encouragement when the going gets tough—which it will.

Technology: An inexpensive home security camera or videoconferencing app like WhatsApp, Facetime or Zoom is key to tracking your dog's emotions and progress.

Dog-Sitters, Friends, Relatives, and YOU: A major component of the program, and also the major stumbling block, is the commitment you need to make sure to never leave your dog alone so that he suffers a panic attack. Remember, when you leave, your dog is panic-stricken, scared to death and unable to function in any normal way. That panic will wipe out any progress that you made before. You will have to go back to square one. So, as difficult as it seems, suspending absences is vital to a successful program.

Ways to cover your absences so your dog is not left alone include doggie daycare, dog walkers, pet sitters and friends who can watch your dog. Many separation anxiety dogs, surprisingly, are comfortable staying in a car while their guardian runs errands. Just make sure you aren't gone too long and the weather conditions are acceptable. This is another area where your professional trainer can help find appropriate helpers and be an advocate for you and your dog.

What does the training involve?

The core technique of a separation anxiety training protocol is ***systematic desensitization***. That means that you expose your dog to the anxiety-producing situation at a non-anxiety-producing level.

Keys to Success

- Training stays below the level of panic-inducing, and each day of training is not necessarily harder for the dog than the day before.
- As your dog shows comfort with each phase of training, new elements are added.
- The behavior modification program that your trainer develops for your dog needs to be carried out exactly as written.

- Duration is increased by seconds rather than minutes.
- ***Take it slooow!*** Patience is vital to the success of this program. If your dog is stressed beyond his threshold then the training will not work. This is where your trainer can coach and support you while you learn the signs of early stress in your dog.
- Set a reasonable goal to work toward. Is it a night out with friends? Working an 8-hour day? Your trainer can help you integrate elements like a midday dog walker as needed.
- Be prepared for setbacks and plateaus. Dogs are sentient beings and behavior modification training is not linear. You will have good weeks of progress and not-so-good weeks where you make no progress or even backslide. Your trainer will help you problem-solve and come up with a plan to get your dog through this stretch.

Tools We Don't Use

- Crates: Very often confinement in combination with alone time increases the dog's anxiety, so even if your dog is happy in a crate when you are home we generally don't use crates during separation anxiety training. If you have a puppy or a dog with a history of soiling or destructive behavior when you are home, your trainer can help you set up appropriate management.
- Food puzzles: Most dogs with separation anxiety are too panicked to eat during absences, and at worst they can signal a departure. Kongs, chews and such are not part of the training, though can be enjoyed when you are home.
- Obedience: As much as we love a good Sit-Stay, obedience is not part of a separation anxiety training plan.
- Punishment: Shock collars, citronella sprays, shaking pennies in a can, etc. are scary and unpleasant to your dog. They are never part of any training or behavior modification program at Marin Humane. An appropriate separation anxiety training protocol teaches your dog that he is safe when you leave, and never, ever punishes him for the emotional state that is beyond his control.

Does treatment work?

Yes! Separation anxiety is treatable and the treatment does work. It is most successful when you (the guardian) have a qualified trainer and vet at your side and you are ready to commit to suspending absences, doing the training and sticking with the program through to the end. These are huge commitments, but if you can make them and the program is followed, it can be successful.

Training Resources

Marin Humane's Behavior & Training department offers separation anxiety training as well as group training classes, behavior consultations, private training, and more. Contact us at 415.506.6280 or ohbehave@marinhumane.org for information.

Remember to license and microchip your dog! It's the law and can help reunite you should your pet get lost. For more information, visit marinhumane.org or call 415.883.4621.