



# SEPARATION ANXIETY

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Separation anxiety occurs when dogs become emotionally distressed when they are separated from the owners they've bonded with. There are different levels of separation anxiety: mild, moderate, and severe. Mild separation anxiety may include a dog that acts slightly depressed when their owner is getting ready to leave, or they might bark or whine a little right after their owner has left. Severe separation anxiety may include excessive panting, drooling, urinating and/or defecating indoors, physically injuring their teeth, nails, or body trying to escape a crate, or chewing up the areas around doors and windows in escape attempts to reunite with their owners. Some dogs have even jumped through glass windows to get to their owners. These animals are having full-blown emotional panic attacks. There is also something called "isolation distress," which occurs when the dog is stressed when alone, but the presence of any human (stranger or owner) or sometimes another animal (dog, cat, rabbit, etc.) will comfort the dog, and there will be few to no symptoms of separation anxiety. As you may have researched, separation anxiety can be hard to work with since the symptoms occur when the owner is away. Please keep in mind that some dogs bark when their owners are away because they are bored, reacting to noises in the environment, or being territorial and do not have separation anxiety. It can be challenging to work with an excessive barker, especially when you live in an apartment or townhouse. There is additional information at the end of this article about how to handle barking.

## Here are some additional strategies to help your dog with separation anxiety:

- Sometimes getting **another dog** can help a dog cope with separation anxiety, but you could also end up with two anxious dogs, depending on the temperament of the other dog. Puppies are not recommended for this because they will often learn the anxiety behaviors that your other dog is exhibiting. You'll want an older, more confident yet laid-back dog. Sometimes the presence of another dog still will not help your dog suffering from separation anxiety. The company of resident dogs may not help a newly adopted dog either; we have to keep in mind that your dogs are new to a newly adopted dog just like your home is new so he/she probably views them as one and the same and doesn't find them that comforting for that reason.
- **Skype**, baby monitors that link up to your smartphone, or other remote monitoring devices are a great way to observe how your dog is doing while you are away and will help you really know if new things you've tried are helping your dog with the transition of living in a new home and if his symptoms are diminishing or increasing.
- Some dogs, if their emotional responses are severe enough (such as extreme lethargy, pacing, drooling, panting, trembling, certain vocalizations, etc.), or if physical responses are severe enough (such as jumping through glass windows, scratching at doors until their nails bleed, chewing through drywall, physically hurting themselves to try to escape a crate, urination/defecation indoors, etc.), will need to be put on medication to help them cope with the stress of being alone while you help teach them that your absence is not as stressful of an event as your dog perceives it to be. The traditional medication dogs are given to cope with separation anxiety at the beginning of training or when a dog is transitioning to a new home is the generic version of Prozac, a.k.a. **fluoxetine**; it is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) drug, and it will take 2-6 weeks to

kick in because it causes the brain to have higher levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin floating around in the brain, which causes your dog to feel happy and calm, but it takes time for the serotonin levels to increase in the brain. Clomicalm, a.k.a. **clomipramine**, is a tricyclic antidepressant (TCA), and is commonly prescribed in place of fluoxetine. Since fluoxetine can take a few weeks to kick in, vets will also prescribe the generic version of Xanax, a.k.a. **alprazolam**, which kicks in immediately and works a little bit more like a sedative. Trazodone is a serotonin antagonist and reuptake inhibitor (SARI) and is also a fast-acting drug that may be prescribed by your vet in the short term and can act like a sedative. That being said, no drug should ever cause your dog to start acting like a zombie or act drunk. You should simply have a calmer version of your dog; dosages can be increased or decreased accordingly. Please be advised that no drug is a behavior cure, and all drugs can have side effects. Medication is only recommended for severe cases and for a time period of six months to a year while you begin a behavior modification plan; then you can begin to taper off the medications gradually.

- There are six over-the-counter options you can try that often calm dogs; please feel free to run them by your vet beforehand; they include: An **Adaptil collar**, which contains a dog-appeasing pheromone, DAP, which is the synthetic version of the same pheromone that lactating female dogs give off while nursing puppies. One collar lasts about one month; these are sold at our retail shop. There are no known side effects to this collar, and humans cannot detect the odor. Body wraps, such as the **Thunder Shirt**, can help calm dogs and make them feel more secure; these are sold at our retail shop. They should never be left on dogs unattended unless you are sure they will not get stuck chewing on it or ingest part of it. **Essential oils**/flower essences can calm dogs; one product is called Rescue Remedy. Classical **music** or special music designed with a rhythm that mimics the resting heartbeat of a dog can calm dogs; one is called Through a Dog's Ear. The white noise of music can also distract dogs and mask other noises, which will help dogs who are prone to barking at any little noise. **Alpha-casozepine**, the brand is De-Stress by Biotics in the U.S. or **Zylkene** in the UK, is a natural supplement that works similarly to Xanax, but it has fewer to no side effects, and you don't have to wait for it to build up in their system like Prozac. **L-Theanine**, brands include Anxitane and Composure Liquid, is a natural amino acid supplement that increases serotonin and dopamine in the brain, which is similar to Prozac, which causes your dog to feel happy and calm with little to no known side effects. Nutrivet Pet Ease is a calming treat that has **chamomile** and **tryptophan** in it, which can calm dogs as well. We also carry Pet Naturals of Vermont calming treat that has L-theanine and colostrum in our retail shop at Wayside.
- Most importantly, you want to take the time to gradually teach your dog that your absence is not a bad thing and that there is a secure, calm area of the house for your dog to nap and await your return. You want the time period that you are away to be gradual because if you go from being home with your new dog all weekend to leaving Monday for 8-9 hours of work, that could trigger your dog to have some level of separation anxiety. You kind of want to think about it like you're teaching a teenager to drive; you start in a parking lot and work your way up to highway driving; you'd never want to start a new driver on the highway. When it comes to a safe, calm space, some people refer to this space as their **Alone Zone**, and is a happy place for your dog, both when you are home AND while you're away. For some dogs this is a **crate**. Please see our Crate Training handout to learn more about how to properly use a crate and train a dog gradually. We recommend a plastic crate over a metal crate because if your dog were to panic and try and chew their way out of the crate, they will not injure themselves nearly as badly on a plastic crate as they will in a metal crate. The darkness that a plastic crate provides also makes the space feel more like a den, which is the typical environment most dogs enjoy sleeping in and being calm. Some dogs that suffer from separation anxiety will panic in a smaller, more confined space and make their symptoms worse, in which case you will not want to crate that animal. Most dogs do best when confined in a room about the size of a bedroom or kitchen. Bathrooms with no windows tend to be

too small, yet living rooms tend to be too open and can cause some dogs to feel insecure. Some dogs do better with the blinds of the windows open while others do better with blinds closed. Using a baby gate to keep a dog confined to certain spaces helps; choosing an area where your dog cannot physically watch you leave through the front door or garage door will be important too. Figuring out what works for your dog will be a process of trial and error. Giving your dog a shirt that smells like you and leaving it on their bed in their Safe Zone will help comfort your dog while you're away. The Adaptil collar company also makes wall plug-ins so you can make that space smell more calm and safe too.

- Practicing **mock departures** and rewarding your dog with **high-value treats** will help your dog learn that your absence is a good or, at the very least, tolerable event. High-value treats that help keep your dog busy while you are away will 1. distract your dog, 2. help calm your dog or provide an outlet for frustration, and 3. Counter-condition your dog to your absence (meaning that the pleasant experience of receiving a high-value treat may override the unpleasant experience of you leaving). Items that are puzzle feeders, such as the Kong Wobbler, will keep your dog busy and allow your dog to use its brain to bat around a toy to try to get kibble to fall out of it. Toys that get your dog to lick, such as a Kong/Red Barn marrow bone filled with frozen peanut butter or frozen wet dog food, will actually calm your dog. The act of licking something causes a dog's brain to release the neurotransmitter oxytocin, which causes animals to relax and feel calm. Chewing on things like rawhides, bully sticks, or deer antlers also distract dogs and helps them get out any frustration or extra energy/instinct to chew. By pairing these high-value items/treats with your absence, you will help counter-condition them to the act of you leaving. Once you know how long these treats last, practice brief mock departures where you leave and come back before your dog has finished eating these items. Some dogs when stressed won't eat, and you may want to try some of the suggestions above. Start with 2 minutes and then gradually work your way up to 2 hours. This may sound a little contradictory, but you'll want to vary the time you are gone so your dog does not figure out that every time you leave it will be for longer and longer time periods, which may stress out your dog. So if you know that your longest time period that you've worked up to so far is for 30 minutes, you will want to throw in some short 5- or 10-minute-long departures before you jump to 45 minutes.
- If your dog is really bad with mock departures, you may need to start with **physical separations** and then **visual separations** while you are still in the house. Physical separations can be practiced by putting up a baby gate with your dog in their safe zone, like a bedroom, and you sitting in a chair in the hallway. You'll want to grab a magazine and just sit and calmly read. When your dog is calm and not barking/whining, you can go and give your dog a treat and tell them "good dog!" Then go back to reading and reward the next calm, quiet moment. Practicing visual separations is the exact same process, except you're going to want to get out of your dog's line of sight. Your starting point may only be 2 seconds, and then you will have to work your way up from there. Some dogs do better if you put them in a **sit-stay** and then hop around the corner out of sight because you're giving their mind and body a structured exercise, which will help them overcome your visual absence. With small approximations you can work your way up to longer separations without the need to put your dog in a sit-stay.
- You'll also want to desensitize your dog to **departure cues**. A departure cue is anything you do before you leave for the day that signals to your dog that you are leaving. That could be the sound of picking up your keys, putting on your jacket, picking up your backpack/purse/briefcase, hearing the garage door open, or the sound of your car turning on and driving away. While you are home, you will want to randomly do all of these things and then NOT leave so your dog realizes that it's no big deal when these things happen because you more often than not stay in the house when the departure cues happen instead of leaving.

- **No coddling:** Make sure you're not talking overly affectionately or being overly physically affectionate with your dog right before you leave or right when you walk back in after being gone for a while. You don't need to completely ignore your dog right before you leave or right after you return, but it's also really important that you don't get your dog worked up or create another inadvertent departure cue for your dog.
- Give your dog a nice, long walk both before and after a long absence. Any form of **exercise** will help release endorphins into your dog's bloodstream, causing him to feel happy yet tired, which will help them settle down and sleep after you leave for a long period of time. It's really important to wake up early enough for you to really give him a nice, long walk before you go to work because generally speaking: A tired dog is a good dog! After you go for your walk in the morning, you'll want to feed him a nice, **large meal**, about ½ or ¾ of his diet, because a nice, full belly after a long walk will also make him feel full and sleepy. You'll want to be careful, however, that your dog is not so anxious when you're gone that it's vomiting after you feed it a full meal. If that is the case, you may want to make sure your dog has a fairly empty stomach before you leave for the day and then feed him the majority of his diet after you've come home for the day.
- While working on your behavior modification plan with your dog, you may want to consider taking your dog to a trusted doggy daycare or having a pet sitter/dog walker help care for your dog so that the lengths they are home alone aren't that long. Also, try working from home when possible. There are also great areas around the city where you can take your dog on your day off or while you run errands that include: hardware stores, some retail shops, restaurants with outdoor patios, public parks, dog parks, etc. Do some research online to find the dog-friendly areas of your city.

**Below are some helpful links with additional information on separation anxiety:**

Recommended books on separation anxiety: *Don't Leave Me*, by Nicole Wilde and *I'll Be Home Soon*, by Patricia Mc Connell

<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/separation-anxiety>

<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/desensitization-and-counterconditioning>

<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/how-stuff-kong-toy>

**Excessive barking is not uncommon when dogs are left home alone:**

Dogs bark for many reasons, and there is a lot of great info with specific steps about how to train a dog to bark less at this link:

<http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/dog-behavior/barking>

**The use of corrective collars, such as electric collars (a.k.a. e-collars) and citronella spray collars, and why we advise against them:**

Generally speaking, electronic collars, citronella spray collars, compressed-air spray collars, and ultrasonic collars used for barking are considered inhumane by applied animal behaviorists and veterinary behaviorists for dogs that bark. Dogs bark for a variety of reasons (fear, territory, attention, etc.), and if a dog receives a shock or other aversive stimulus while acting aroused or fearful, it is possible they could begin to associate that stimulus with whatever is causing the dog to bark. That could mean that if a dog is barking in an apartment because it hears other people in the complex walking down the hallway or up and

down the stairs and then it receives a shock, they could pair the sound of the people with the shock and begin to fear strangers more and or become aggressive toward strangers.

People often buy these corrective collars because they want a quick fix because they don't have the time or patience to determine the root cause of the problem and the time it takes to train a dog using other, more humane behavioral modification techniques. Along with that, many people have just grown up seeing other adults using older, more traditional forms of dog training, so people simply don't know that there are other, more humane ways of training and communicating with animals.

***If, after trying these suggestions, you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your dog, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: [www.waysidewaifs.org](http://www.waysidewaifs.org).***

Written by the Wayside Waifs Animal Behavior Team

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Other Resources:

- Here is an interesting link that describes the different types of dog collars out there and the pros and cons to using them:

<http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/dogs/tips/collars.html#>

- Here is an interesting article that discusses why aversive collars are a bad idea and cites two studies in *Applied Animal Behavior Science* (a peer-reviewed scientific journal):

<http://www.pawsitivepackleader.com/node/27>