

SEPARATION ANXIETY IN YOUR PET



Both dogs and cats can exhibit symptoms of separation anxiety. Below are tips for identifying if your pet is suffering from this separation anxiety and some solutions to help calm their fears.

Separation Anxiety in Dogs:

Dogs with separation anxiety exhibit behavior problems when they're left alone. Typically, they'll have a dramatic anxiety response within a short time (20-45 minutes) after their owners leave them. The most common of these behaviors are:

- Digging, chewing and scratching at doors or windows in an attempt to escape and reunite with their owners.
- Howling, barking and crying in an attempt to get their owner to return.
- Urination and defecation (even with housetrained dogs) as a result of distress.

Why Do Dogs Suffer From Separation Anxiety?

We don't fully understand exactly why some dogs suffer from separation anxiety and, under similar circumstances, others don't. It's important to realize, however, that the destruction and house soiling that often occur with separation anxiety are not the dog's attempt to punish or seek revenge on his owner for leaving him alone, but are actually part of a panic response.

Separation anxiety sometimes occurs when:

- A dog has never or rarely been left alone.
- Following a long interval, such as a vacation, during which the owner and dog are constantly together.
- After a traumatic event (from the dog's point of view) such as a period of time spent at a shelter or boarding kennel.
- After a change in the family's routine or structure (a child leaving for college, a change in work schedule, a move to a new home, a new pet or person in the home).

How Do I Know If My Dog Has Separation Anxiety?

Because there are many reasons for the behaviors associated with separation anxiety, it's essential to correctly diagnose the reason for the behavior before proceeding with treatment. If most, or all, of the following statements are true about your dog, he may have a separation anxiety problem:

- The behavior occurs exclusively or primarily when he's left alone.
- The behavior always occurs when he's left alone, whether for a short or long period of time.
- He follows you from room to room whenever you're home.
- He reacts with excitement, depression or anxiety to your preparations to leave the house.
- He displays effusive, frantic greeting behaviors. He dislikes spending time outdoors by himself.

What to Do If Your Dog Has Separation Anxiety

For a minor separation anxiety problem, the following techniques may be helpful by themselves. For more severe problems, these techniques should be used along with the desensitization process described in the next section.

Keep arrivals and departures low-key. For example, when you arrive home, ignore your dog for the first few minutes, then calmly pet him.

Leave your dog with an article of clothing that smells like you. For example, an old tee shirt that you've slept in recently.

Establish 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. Therefore, it's helpful to associate a safety cue with your practice departures and short-duration absences.

Some examples of safety cues are: a playing radio; a playing television; 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, but don't present your dog with the safety cue when you leave for a period of time longer than he can tolerate or the value of the safety cue will be lost. Leaving a radio on to provide company for your dog isn't particularly useful by itself, but a playing radio may work if you've used it consistently as a safety cue in your practice sessions. If your dog engages in destructive chewing as part of his separation distress, offering him a chewing item as a safety cue is a good idea. Very hard rubber toys that can be stuffed with treats and Nylabone-like products are good choices.

Desensitization Techniques for More Severe Cases of Separation Anxiety

The primary treatment for more severe cases of separation anxiety is a systematic process of getting your dog used to being alone. You must teach your dog to remain calm during "practice" departures and short absences. We recommend the following procedure:

Begin by engaging in your normal departure activities (getting your keys, putting on your coat), then sit back down. Repeat this step until your dog shows no distress in response to your activities.

Next, engage in your normal departure activities and go to the door and open it, then sit back down.

Next, step outside the door, leaving the door open, then return.

Finally, step outside, close the door, then immediately return. Slowly get your dog accustomed to being alone with the door closed between you for several seconds.

Proceed very gradually from step to step, repeating each step until your dog shows no signs of distress (the number of repetitions will vary depending on the severity of the problem). If at any time in this process your actions produce an anxiety response in your dog, you've proceeded too fast. Return to an earlier step in the process and practice this step until the dog shows no distress response, then proceed to the next step.

When your dog is tolerating your being on the other side of the door for several seconds, begin short-duration absences. This step involves giving the dog a verbal cue (for example, "I'll be back."), leaving and then returning within a minute. Your return must be low-key: either ignore your dog or greet him quietly and calmly. If he shows no signs of distress, repeat the exercise. If he appears anxious, wait until he relaxes to repeat the exercise. Gradually increase the length of time you're gone.

Practice as many absences as possible that last less than ten minutes. You can do many departures within one session if your dog relaxes sufficiently between departures. You should also scatter practice departures and short-duration absences throughout the day.

Once your dog can handle short absences (30 to 90 minutes), he'll usually be able to handle longer intervals alone and you won't have to work up to all-day absences minute by minute. The hard part is at the beginning, but the job gets easier as you go along. Nevertheless, you must go slowly at first. How long it takes to condition your dog to being alone depends on the severity of his problem.

Teaching the Sit-Stay and Down-Stay

Practice sit-stay or down-stay exercises using positive reinforcement. Never punish your dog during these training sessions. Gradually increase the distance you move away from your dog. Your goal is to be able to move briefly out of your dog's sight while he remains in the "stay" position. The point is to teach him that he can remain calmly and happily in one place while you go to another. As you progress, you can do this during the course of your normal daily activities. For example, if you're watching television with your dog by your side and you get up for a snack, tell him to stay, and leave the room. When you come back, give him a treat or quietly praise him.

Interim Solutions

Because the above-described treatments can take a while, and because a dog with separation anxiety can do serious damage to himself and/or your home in the interim, some of the following suggestions may be helpful in dealing with the problems in the short term:

Consult your veterinarian about the possibility of drug therapy. A good anti-anxiety drug should not sedate your dog, but simply reduce his anxiety while you're gone. Such medication is a temporary measure and should be used in conjunction with behavior modification techniques.

Take your dog to a dog day care facility or boarding kennel.

Leave your dog with a friend, family member or neighbor.

Take your dog to work with you, even for half a day, if possible.

What Won't Help a Separation Anxiety Problem

Punishment is not an effective way to treat separation anxiety. In fact, if you punish your dog after you return home it may actually increase his separation anxiety.

Getting another pet. This usually doesn't help an anxious dog as his anxiety is the result of his separation from you, his person, not merely the result of being alone.

Crating your dog. Your dog will still engage in anxiety responses in the crate. He may urinate, defecate, howl or even injure himself in an attempt to escape from the crate.

Leave the radio on (unless the radio is used as a "safety cue" - see above).

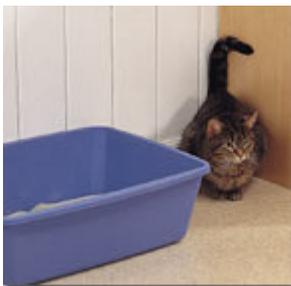
Obedience school. While obedience training is always a good idea, it won't directly help a separation anxiety problem. Separation anxiety is not the result of disobedience or lack of training, it's a panic response.

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Separation Anxiety in Cats:

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Many people are familiar with separation anxiety in dogs, but assume it does not occur in cats. However, recent research by veterinary behaviorists suggests that separation anxiety may also develop in cats. Contrary to what had often been thought in the past, cats are actually very social creatures and can form strong bonds with people and with other animals. While there is certainly more research to be done in this area, this syndrome could be an important consideration for those dealing with anxiety-related feline behavior problems.



What are the signs of separation anxiety in cats?

Signs of separation anxiety in cats may occur when the cat is separated from its owner or another companion pet with which it has a strong bond. A cat with separation anxiety may insist on being with the owner at all times, even following the owner from room to room. When the owner gets ready to leave the house, the cat may sulk and hide, or try to get between the owner and the door. When the owner returns, the cat may show an abnormally enthusiastic greeting.

Some of the behavioral problems triggered by separation anxiety in cats are the same as those seen in dogs: vocalizing after the owner leaves, inappropriate urination or defecation (sometimes near a door or on the owner's personal items), and, less often, destructiveness (chewing, scratching). Cats may also show their distress in other, less obvious ways such as becoming too anxious to eat when left alone; or vomiting only when the owner is not there. A less common sign in cats may be excessive grooming, to the point of creating a bald spot on one or two areas of the body.

What causes separation anxiety?

It is not known for sure what causes separation anxiety in cats. It has been speculated that there may be both genetic and environmental factors involved. Being orphaned or being weaned early may predispose a kitten to developing separation anxiety. While future research will give us more information, for now, the best prevention is to try to start out with a kitten that is well-socialized and thus hopefully will be less likely to develop behavior problems of any type.

What should I do if I suspect my cat has separation anxiety?

The first step is to discuss the situation with your veterinarian and have your cat undergo a complete physical examination. It is important to make sure that your cat's behavior is not due to an underlying physical problem. For example, a cat which is urinating outside the litter box and/or doing a lot of howling may be developing a urinary tract obstruction or infection. A cat that is over-grooming may have a food allergy. Your veterinarian may recommend some tests including a complete blood count, a chemistry profile, urinalysis, thyroid testing, or a blood pressure check. Because separation anxiety in cats is just beginning to be studied, you may find it helpful to work with an animal behaviorist, who can help you to rule out other types of anxiety-related behaviors.

How is separation anxiety treated?

In dogs, the most effective therapy for separation anxiety often involves a combination of behavior modification and anti-anxiety medication. It is likely that this would be true in the case of cats as well.

It may be possible to make the time surrounding the owner's departure less stressful for the cat, by making some changes in the normal routine. For 15 minutes prior to leaving and upon returning home, the owner should ignore the cat. Leaving a distracting toy can be helpful. An empty toilet paper roll with the ends closed off and holes in the sides can be filled with various types and sizes of treats, which will fall out as the cat plays with the roll. There are also commercial food-dispensing toys available which are used in similar ways, e.g., Kongs and Buster Cubes. Another option is to hide very tasty food treats (cooked chicken) in various places in the house. Other toys the cat especially likes should be taken out just before the owner leaves and put away once the owner returns. When the owner returns, the cat should basically be ignored for approximately 15 minutes.

Making the cat's environment more stimulating may help, also. A comfortable perch that allows a view from a window can provide entertainment, especially if there is a bird feeder in sight. Climbing ledges or carpeted towers with attached toys can be fun also. Leaving a radio or TV on softly can be comforting; some cats enjoy "cat videos" with sounds and pictures of birds and other small creatures. Some cats may be less anxious with another animal in the house, but this depends on the individual cat and may or may not be a good solution.

In some cases, anti-anxiety medication may also be needed for a short time period. These medications may include [Buspar](#), [Prozac](#), and [Clomicalm](#). These are not labeled specifically for use in cats, and their use must be prescribed and monitored by your veterinarian.

Future research will give us more information about the incidence, cause, and treatment of separation anxiety in cats, and help us to make life better for our feline friends.

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