How to Prevent Canine Separation Anxiety and Help Dogs Already Suffering From it

Simply put, separation anxiety is a syndrome involving the display of panic symptoms in response to being left alone. Destructive behavior during owner's absence can signal boredom, need for more exercise, need for stimulation when gone, or deep anxieties.

Dogs with separation anxiety exhibit distress in the form of behavior problems when left alone. Typically, they'll have a dramatic anxiety response within a short time after their owners leave them. Common distress symptoms include one or more of the following: scratching and digging near doors and windows in an attempt to escape and find their people ... chewing door frames or other items in an attempt to channel their anxiety ... barking, whining and howling in an attempt to summon their person ... excessive salivation ... chewing on or licking themselves ... and sometimes even urination and defecation due to the immense physiological effect of prolonged stress.

Any or all of these symptoms indicate “separation-anxiety-syndrome” if they occur when the dog is left alone. Other signs sometimes associated separation anxiety include: the dog reacts frantically when his person arrives home; acts sad or frantic or starts drooling and panting when the person gets ready to leave the house; and/or follows his person and acts clingy much of the time the person is home.

True clinical separation anxiety is not very common. However, many dogs do suffer from anxiety symptoms when they are separated from the people they perceive as their pack.

What Causes Canine Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety can develop in dogs who have previously not spent much time alone ... who have been abandoned at key points in their psychological development ... who were not properly integrated into their first home and got relegated to a basement, garage or yard ... who were removed from mother and littermates too early (prior to 8 weeks of age) or too late (after 14 weeks) ... who have endured a traumatic event, such as a frightening experience at a shelter or kennel, or a significant change in their household, such as a new person joining the family, a move to another house, or change in the owner's work schedule. Some dogs tend to become extremely attached to their new person, and then insecure when that person leaves, as a result of losing a previous home and person to which he was attached.

Separation anxiety also often plagues dogs in what behaviorist Larry Lachman terms a "triangled" situation – dogs used as an emotional replacement or sponge for someone else in the family. The excessive attention and touching common to such relationships can result in over-dependency, which can lead to a dog's inability to cope with the departure and/or absence of his special person. Even when not in such a dysfunctional relationship, dogs can develop anxiety responses due to their people lavishing too much attention (constant petting and rubbing, constant chatter, too much lap time, etc.) when they're home - thus creating a super-needy dog who can't occupy herself or even stand to be alone.

It's not clear why some dogs suffer from separation anxiety while others exposed to similar experiences do not. Some experts believe that in some cases there may be a genetic predisposition. However, it is known that there are ways for owner/guardians to help ward off development of separation anxiety - and to help their dogs if symptoms are already evident. Experts also agree that separation anxiety is a panic reaction, and definitely not an attempt by the dog to “spite” their people.

Punishment Does Not Work - Do Not Punish the Dog

Punishment, yelling and ostracizing will not work to cure separation anxiety. Punishment will only aggravate the situation by raising the dog's overall anxiety and compounding it with fear of his owner. Remember that

separation anxiety is a panic response, not behavior that the dog willfully engages in. Also remember that if you are stressed out, that will only add to your dog's anxiety. Stay calm and unemotional when dealing with bouts of separation anxiety.

Preventing Canine Separation Anxiety from Developing

Dogs evolved as companions to people, and they are pack animals. However, owner/guardians need to help their dogs find a healthy balance between enjoying companionship and becoming sufficiently independent to tolerate being alone for periods of time.

People must condition their dogs to stay calm when left alone. To condition means to get the dog used to specific things, situations and events. That's why it's important to practice leaving and returning to the dog frequently, starting when you first bring the dog into your home and family. This will teach your dog from the start that you're leaving the house is an ordinary event, thus helping the dog to build a tolerance for your departures and absences.

Start Early to Build an Anxiety-Free Environment for Your New Dog

- When you first bring your dog home, take him in the yard first and then into the house. Inside the house, show him around. Particularly with a male dog, watch and be prepared to say “No!” or “Nah-ah-ahh!” at the first sign of the dog getting ready to lift his leg to mark something. Then offer the dog a treat for being good. Next, take him outside to go again and take him to the same potty spot. This helps him start learning the concept of going outside.

- Have the dog's bed and bowl of water ready in a safe, well-lighted, comfortable confined area with "family smells", such as a gated-off kitchen, family room or crate placed in a family area. (Do not confine them in basements, garages, storage rooms, or other non-family areas). This nice "den" will be the place in which she will stay when you are not home to supervise. Take her to that place, tell her lie down (guide her if she has not yet learned that command). Then give him/her one or two safe chew toys and praise them. You can couple a food treat with the verbal praise. In fact, it's helpful to keep a small bag of tiny tidbit treats on you at all times during the acclimation and training phases.

- Next, close the door or gate to the room or crate, and step back. See if she is staying calm. If so, resist the urge to talk to the dog, since that will distract her from this desired, calm, relaxed behavior.

- Leave the room for 5 seconds. Return. Gradually, increase the duration of your absence by very small increments.

- If she stays reasonably calm when separated from you for a minute or two, let her stay there as long as she seems comfortable. As soon as you notice any signs of the dog growing anxious or uncomfortable, take her outside again for a walk or a short play session.

- If the dog is good in her confined area, this is a very good sign. You can begin to add calm, quiet verbal praise and an occasional food treat to this acclimation routine as a reward for being good and calm in her confined area. When you release your dog from the room or crate, do so in a low-key manner; it's best to give no response at all when the dog comes out of the crate for the first minute or so. This is part of establishing the confined place as a secure den, vs. a jail from which she desires to escape.

- By the way, another good idea is to rotate the safe chew toys that you give your dog each day. Also, include interactive toys in the mix, such as Kongs and Buster Cubes. (Details about using the hollow Kong toys appear later in this article.)

- Next, leave the room for increasingly longer periods.

- Realize that this important acclimation training will take some time and patience; you will need to repeat these activities for a few days in the effort to anxiety-proof your dog.

- Next step: leave the house and come back in right away. Progressively lengthen these outings until you can know that your dog displays no anxiety about your departures - which means she realizes that when you leave her, you always eventually return.

- Note: it is important, particularly during this acclimation phase, to make sure you do not leave your dog alone any longer than she can reasonably, comfortably wait to urinate. If you leave the dog alone so long that she feels discomfort about "holding it", or gets hungry, or gets scared, you are teaching her that she does have reason to worry when you leave. You, of course, want her to learn the opposite: that she can trust you, her leader, will always return in time to properly take care of her needs. Consistency is critical.

- Gradually lengthen your absences to 15 minutes, 30 minutes, and longer. Hopefully, she will not get anxious since you have been conditioning her to accept your absences as a normal part of life.
  She will learn to be confident that you will return, and also, she will learn that it is you, as pack leader, who decides what happens and when.

- It's good to stay in range the first few days of this acclimation exercise so that you can tell if and when your dog shows signs of anxiety.

- If at any point your dog begins showing anxiety about your departure, go back to a shorter absence and continue working to build her confidence. And at any time, now or after the acclimation phase, you come home and find that your dog experienced anxious behavior (through evidence of scratching, digging, chewing, barking, pools of drool, etc.) halve the time you leave the dog alone for awhile and work to increase the time increments slowly. If your dog continues displaying anxiety symptoms, cut the time in half again.

This acclimation process is worth the time it takes, because starting out right will set the pace for your dog, accustom her to her "home-alone" environment, and help ward off potential adjustment problems. Because of the time that these acclimation exercises involve, it's usually best for working folks to arrange for some vacation time when getting a new dog, or to bring the dog home on a Friday just before your weekend begins.

Attention is good, but you also need to educate your dog so that she's ready for your real-world routine. The common failure to help dogs adjust leads to unrealistic expectations - and often, anxiety when you suddenly leave on that first workday after getting the dog. In general, it is always best to set the ground rules upfront - and stick to them fairly and consistently. You can loosen up later if you wish, but tightening up is really hard after your dog is inadvertently conditioned to get out of control.

Is Crating Effective?

Your goal is to condition the dog to be relaxed and comfortable in a specific room or crate where he will remain while you are away. However, crating regularly for over 6 or so hours can be counterproductive and ineffective (even if the dog can hold his urine that long). Also, while you can use crates for time-outs, never banish dogs to crate as punishment. You want the crate to always have positive associations.

Moreover, a crate should not be used for separation-anxious dogs unless the dog is FIRST gradually and successfully accustomed to spending time in the crate and then gradually, successfully accustomed to being alone in the crate - relaxed, not nervous or frantic. Many separation-anxious dogs cannot be crated when alone because it fuels their anxiety even more - and results in a substantial setback in the effort to condition the dog to

accept your absences.

If using a crate for your new pup or newly adopted dog, practice using the crate when you're home. Make the crate homey; place it in a pleasant family area with light and nice views.
Some dogs like to see outside and for other, such visibility leads to over-excitement, so find out what works for your dog.

To acclimate the dog to the crate from the start, show him that "all good things happen in the crate." Entice the dog into the crate and immediately provide a toy that contains something edible, such as a Kong stuffed with kibble adhered with some peanut butter, or a Buster Cube filled with kibble. One smart tip is to feed the dog a meal via the Kong or cube. Go sit down with a book or watch TV nearby. Let your dog out when he is calm and quiet. Resist the urge to let a dog out of a crate when barking or displaying other anxiety symptoms, because that rewards the unwanted behavior you're trying to avoid or eliminate.

When acclimating your dog to a crate, give lots of positives for entering and staying calming in the crate. You don't even have to close the door each time, although you will want to practice getting the dog accustomed to the crate door being closed and latched.

Give no response when the dog comes out of the crate for the first minute or so. Many people mistakenly give dogs a rousing, ebullient response when exiting the crate, but that tends to reinforce the idea that being out is infinitely better than being in. While the dog probably realizes this, you don't need to amplify the message. When crate training, you want the dog to think "this is my special place, and I like it here."

*If your dog already has serious separation anxiety, don't use a crate; follow the tips in other sections of this guide.

- Give your dog adequate exercise and playtime every day. Dogs are social beings, so this activity is important not only to channel their physical energy, but also to engage their minds and meet their need for human companionship. Don't wait until your dog begs for attention. As leader, it is your job to initiate and lead the dog in play. As for walks, most dogs need two brisk leash-walks of at least 15 or 20 minutes each. Some dogs need more.

- Avoid lavishing too much attention on your dog. Same goes for the wrong type of attention, such as overindulging with constant touching ... always having her in your lap, draped over you or leaning next to you ... placing the dog in elevated positions where humans customarily are (in the front seat of car, at the table, on the couch, in the human's bed) ... coddling (and thus rewarding) when she displays fearful or aggressive behavior. Other missteps to avoid: overly excited greetings when you arrive home from work ... petting the dog every time she demands it, such as by rubbing up against you or pushing her head against your hand ... letting your dog initiate play instead of the other way around.

*By creating a demand-lavish attention dynamic, you would inadvertently teach your dog to be far too dependent on you, increasing the chances the dog will suffer overwhelming anxiety when you're gone. There is a difference between unhealthy overdependence and healthy trust. You want to be the leader, you want the dog to trust, respect and listen to you, but you don't want the dog to become an emotional slave who can't bear to be alone.

- Teach your dog to earn attention and praise by obliging your requests to sit, lie down or come when you tell him to.

- Reward your dog for resting quietly in her place. Reward calm behavior with quiet attention and treats. This will help her associate her place, den or bed with serenity and security. Attention is often a highly motivational reward for good behavior.

- Keep to a routine, at least until the dog fully adjusts to your home. Canines thrive on a routine, which also helps them learn that you come and go, you always return, and that he can count on getting attention, food and exercise each day -- avoiding and alleviating his anxiety.

- Keep departures and returns low-key. Don't make a big show of leaving. Gather your items quietly, efficiently and matter-of-factly and quietly leave. Be aware that dogs are very sensitive to their owners' actions and activities. This includes an owner's "leaving routine": most dogs quickly pick up that when their person gets his shoes, coat, briefcase and keys and begins fiddling with lights, it means the person is departing for an extended period. And do not act anxious; anxiety is contagious.

- You can desensitize your dog to your departures with this following exercise. Note: this differs somewhat from the acclimation process described above, and can be used in conjunction with that more elaborate routine. Get ready to leave. Go to the door, but don't exit. Quietly move about, go back to the door, leave. Come back in. Ignore the dog during this exercise. Exit and enter several times, increasing the length of your absences from one minute to one hour.

*Remember, it's unfair and unreasonable to expect a dog to hold his or her urine for much longer than 8 hours. Young dogs might only be physically able "hold it" for only 2 to 4 hours.

Managing Separation Anxiety: How to Help Your Dog

For most cases of separation anxiety, the following tips will help. For severe problems, these techniques should be used along with a behavior modification program structured by a canine behaviorist.

1. Foster self-assurance and a degree of independence:

Instill confidence and independence. Dogs need to find a balance between respecting their pack leader, enjoying companionship and handling solitude. "Don't let the dog follow you around the house," advises Los Angeles trainer Cinimon Clark. "He needs to learn to survive by himself." Teach and then frequently use the Down-Stay command. For instance, when you're washing dishes and the dog hovers next to you, instruct him to "down" on his blanket and "stay" there the entire time. Then release him and have some play time together.

Insecure dogs tend to follow their people around the house, look anxious as the people prepare to leave, and become distraught when they are alone. They bark after their people leave, sometimes destroy things, and may even urinate or defecate out of anxiety.

Often, it's tempting to give an anxious, insecure dog too much attention, but over-empathizing usually aggravates behavior problems. Insecure dogs need to be retrained to be independent, writes Dr. Nicholas Dodman in "The Dog Who Loved Too Much." It takes firm yet supportive leadership and clear direction to help your dog overcome this behavioral problem.

2. Build tolerance to staying alone:

Retrain your dog to accept absences as an ordinary event, using the acclimation exercises in the "Preventing Separation Anxiety" section. For a dog who already displays separation anxiety, be prepared for using absences of shorter duration and working up to longer periods more slowly. Progressing too fast will lead to setbacks. The idea is to advance slowly enough to avoid the dog lapsing into anxious freak-outs. After a few days of the leaving/return practice sessions, increase the duration of absences randomly so the dog can't guess when you will return.

3. Practice "fire drills":

Go out, return, sit, play a game, go out. Vary the time you are gone.

4. Reduce the contrast technique:

Canine behaviorist/author Larry Lachman explains that most separation-anxious dogs cannot tolerate the either-or conditions of attention when the owner is home vs. no attention when the owner leaves. So reduce the contrast: pick two days out of week when you are home. Ignore the dog for 6 to 8 hours on those days, to match the time you are away at work. Limit attention to only feeding or letting the dog out to potty during these sessions. Your dog will learn: "It's not a big deal when my owner is gone, even when he's home, he still sometimes ignores me."

5. Take all excitement, fuss and drama out of departures and returns:

Keep arrivals and departures low-key. No emotive goodbyes or effusive hello-I-missed-you's. In fact, it can be best to say nothing and avoid eye contact, totally ignoring your dog for 15 or 20 minutes before you leave the house and after you arrive home. After that, provided the dog is reasonably calm, then you can let her out of her safety room and calmly, quietly pet and praise her. For a dog who still displays significant anxiety, it's usually recommended to continue ignoring the dog until she totally settles down and begins to relax.

6. Uncoupling cues - easy technique to desensitize departures:

Dogs are extremely adept at reading body language. So chances are, your dog can easily tell the difference between your going outside to bring in the mail and your departure for work. Your dog will notice cues such as you pre-departure preparations -- getting your coat and bag, taking out keys, turning off lights. Separation-anxious dogs will respond by exhibiting anxiety signals such as whining, pacing, drooling, yelping and/or yipping.

One way to reduce your dog's anxiety about being separated from you is to "uncouple the cues" -- engage in your pre-departure routines without always leaving the house. Put on your coat and rattle your keys at times other than when you are actually going out. Keep grabbing your coat and keys and putting them back down again until your dog doesn't bother getting excited anymore. Now you can start rewarding the dog for NOT responding to the stimulus; this is a form of shaping behavior.

If there is something else that triggers your dog's anxiety over your leaving, such as putting on shoes by a door or switching lights on or off, throw these into the mix as well. This exercise will help desensitize your dog to the anxiety-starters that signal your imminent departure.

7. Establish a "safety cue":

A safety cue is a word, gesture, action or even a special toy that you teach the dog to associate with the idea that when you leave, you will always come back. Use the safety cue each time you leave the house, starting by cueing it to brief absences (such as taking out the trash or checking the mail box). Your safety cue might be gently saying "Take care of the house" ... a playing radio or tape ... or a distinctive chew toy.

Start out using the safety cue during practice sessions. However, to establish the cue as an effective tool, do not use it when you're leaving for longer durations than your dog has learned to tolerate.

8. Timing when you give your dog attention:

As previously mentioned, some of our own behaviors as dog guardians can contribute to a dog's intolerance of being alone or ignored - such as constantly petting or fussing over the dog when we are home. If this sounds like your situation, try changing your behavior: always have your dog sit before giving attention and then only give 10 seconds of petting at a time. If he wants more, wait until he is not actively seeking it, have him sit again, and give him another 10 seconds of petting.

Additional Canine Anxiety-Thwarting Tips

- Ignore attention-seeking behaviors. Do not respond when the dog demands attention. This helps teach your dog that he can't manipulate you to get attention. Yes, you can give your dog attention, but for the needy or separation-anxious dog, it's best if you initiate the attention, and as much as possible, tie attention to desired behaviors.

- Instead of the dog initiating contact with you, strive daily to change the dynamic: you initiate the contact, be it playing, petting, deciding when to eat and take walks. The owner, as pack leader, should control the activities. If the owner controls activities in a manner that protects and meets the needs of the dog, the dog's trust in his person will increase and his insecurities will fade. “If he comes up to you for a pet, ignore him for about 3 minutes, or until he stops asking you, then ask him to come over and sit,” suggests Cin Clark. "Now you can pet him. I use the command ENOUGH for stopping the petting. If he still tries to get your attention, walk away.”

- Ration attention out in small bits to ease your dog's dependence on you and other family members. Limit attention to times when the dog is engaged in a desirable behavior, such as resting calmly in her own spot (vs. draped over your lap), and when the dog responds to a verbal command or hand signal. Have him earn attention by telling him to "Sit" and "Down-Stay." When you give a separation-anxious dog attention, dole it out in very brief increments. One second can be enough.

- Avoid letting the separation-anxious dog sit in your lap, drape herself over you, or rest in elevated, "human" places like the sofa. And don't let the dog sleep on the bed with you. He can be in the same room, just on his own bed. If she insists upon sneaking back into your bed, you can tie a long leash to a dresser. The idea is to foster some independence, so take these steps at least until your dog has overcome her separation anxiety problems.

- Use training to build the dog's self-confidence: Teach Sit, Down and Stay. This can aid the effort to teach your dog how to relax in one spot when you leave. Reward your dog with positive reinforcement - praise, or praise plus treats - for staying calmly in a position for increasingly longer periods of time. Don't punish your dog for not obeying. Just ignore incorrect responses, regain the dog's attention and continue.

- Gradually increase the distance you move away from your dog so that you can eventually move briefly out of your dog's sight while he remains in the "stay" position. The idea is to teach him that he can remain calmly, in a non-anxious state, in one place while you go to another. Take easy opportunities to practice. For instance, when you're watching TV with your dog nearby and you get up for a snack, tell your dog "stay." When you return, give him a tidbit and very gently praise him for obeying.

- When practicing these leaving/returning sessions, increase the duration of your absence randomly to prevent your dog from learning to guess when you will return. You are working to retrain your dog to listen to you and to be less clingy, aiding your effort to accustom your dog to being alone without getting frantic. Depending on your individual dog and the consistency of your training efforts, you should be able to move briefly out of your dog's sight after a few days.

Don't Let Your Dog Train You!

Canine separation anxiety is just as much of a human problem as it is a canine one. Nearly all the anxiety-related problems that your dog might be dealing with now (or in the future) are a result of something that was done to him/her before you got them, or directly related to how you've trained them. Now that you're aware of how the problem starts and how it can be prevented, it's so crucial that you follow the information you've been given here

and make sure not to allow your dog to “unknowingly” train you to be an enabler of unhealthy anxiety-related behavior.