



Tompkins County SPCA

Dog Care Series

Separation Anxiety

Dogs are highly social animals. They can learn to handle being alone for moderate periods of time but, in most cases, it doesn't come naturally. It's not surprising then that some dogs develop *separation anxiety*, a disorder which, in its severe form, can consist of panic attacks: urinating, defecating, frantically scratching and chewing at doorframes, barking and crying whenever the dog is left alone.

Separation anxiety is often triggered by either a high contrast situation – months of the owner home all day followed by sudden eight-hour absences – or some sort of life change – a new home, a death of a key family member or major change in routine.

Separation anxiety is both preventable and responds well to treatment. The treatment approach depends on whether the case is mild or severe. The first step is recognizing that dogs with separation anxiety are not misbehaving out of boredom, spite or for fun. Some dogs with separation anxiety are fine when left alone in the car or fine when the owner leaves with slippers on to take out the garbage – they have learned the difference between “long absence” pictures and “short absence” pictures. Others are anxious in all contexts.

Preventing Separation Anxiety

Puppies and newly adopted dogs are at higher risk to develop separation anxiety if they are smothered with constant attention their first few days home. It is much better to leave for brief periods extremely often so the dog's early learning about departures is that they are no big deal and predict easy, tolerable lengths of absence: “whenever she leaves, she comes back.”

Give your dog both physical exercise *and* mental work to do. Not only does problem solving increase confidence and independence, it is mentally fatiguing and so increases the likelihood that your dog will rest quietly when he is left alone. Teach him to play hide and seek with his toys, teach him tricks, get him involved in a sport like obedience, Flyball or Agility, let him free-play with other dogs, stuff all or part of his food ration into Kong toys, teach him how to play fetch and tug. The more activities and toys are incorporated into his life, the less he will depend on human social contact as sole stimulation.

Soften the blow of your departures by providing extremely enticing stuffed toys for him to unpack. See our “Kong is King” handout for tips on improving your technique!

Mild Separation Anxiety

Reduce the contrast between when you're gone and when you're home. Refrain from smothering him with affection (see the “mental work” options above to discover other ways of interacting with your dog). Regularly interrupt his shadowing you around the house continuously when you're home by baby-gating him into another room for short periods. This is like practicing a “semi-absence.” Do many, many extremely brief (1 – 30 seconds) absences with no fanfare on departure or arrival. Increase physical exercise and mental stimulation.

Severe Separation Anxiety

In severe cases, the informal interventions above will usually not help. What's needed is a formal program of *systematic desensitization* to change the dog's deeply ingrained emotional reaction to departure. The track record of systematic desensitization is excellent for resolving separation anxiety, however it is a huge amount of work for the dog's caregiver!

The key is to observe the dog for the first signs of anxiety during the owner's usual ritual prior to leaving the house. Most dogs with severe separation anxiety start becoming anxious before the owner leaves. They have learned the

“picture” associated with imminent departure and begin panting, pacing, salivating, whining or hiding. In fact, these symptoms of pre-departure anxiety are one of the ways separation anxiety can be distinguished from recreational chewing or behavior problems that result from dogs simply not understanding the rules or lacking outlets for their energy.

Once the kick-off point of the pre-departure anxiety is found, treatment begins by repeatedly commencing the ritual at this point but not adding the subsequent steps or leaving, to teach the dog to relax in the presence of the cues that formerly triggered anxiety. Once the dog is relaxed, subsequent steps in the ritual leading up to departure and, finally, real absences are gradually introduced, always contingent on the dog’s continued relaxation. The dog is then, over time, worked back up to normal length absences. *The hard part for the owner is that, for the duration of this treatment, the dog cannot experience absences in day to day life that are longer than the point he has reached in treatment exercises. This means essentially that, early on in treatment, the dog cannot be left alone.* Owners typically employ dog-sitters, vacation time, doggie day-care and bringing the dog to work to manage this during treatment.

Separation Anxiety Key Points

- 1) Suspend Absences Temporarily:** Ideally, during treatment, absences longer than your current level in desensitization sessions should be suspended. This means bringing the dog along, getting a sitter or temporarily rearranging your schedule. If you must leave the dog alone, anti-anxiety medication should be considered
- 2) Hang In There:** A disproportionate amount of your time will be spent getting over the few first hurdles. It will feel long-winded and frustrating. Try to get into a Zen-like frame of mind and simply do the exercises without obsessing about a perceived lack of progress. Subsequent progress is achieved more rapidly
- 3) The More Reps the Better:** There is no substitute, in this kind of training, for sheer volume of trials. Also, interestingly, long training sessions work well (better to do just one 40 minute session than 4 x 10 minutes)
- 4) Build On Success:** Never bump up the level of difficulty until the dog is strong at the current level. This means no evidence of anxiety. You may even occasionally want to bump down the level of difficulty if he isn't desensitizing to what you're attempting
- 5) Build Gradually, Especially At First:** Ease up the level of difficulty in small increments. If your increase still produces no anxiety, you can always increase slightly again in a couple of trials
- 6) If It All Falls Apart, Don't Despair, Do a Review:** If you have a bad day or a bad session, the best thing to do is go back to square one and re-do easy, early exercises to get the dog successful again. Temporary regressions are normal and don't mean you've "lost" all your progress
- 7) Use a Safety Cue to Signal an Endurable Absence Time:** Have some consistent statement or ritual that will become associated with a "safe" length of absence
- 8) Don't Start on Absences Until the Dog is No Longer Responding to the Pre-Departure Cues:** You will spend a lot of time working on desensitizing the dog to the rituals that predict departure. Don't jump ahead to any absences until this is thoroughly accomplished (see #s 2 & 4...)
- 9) Practice "Semi-Absences" While You're At Home:** Prevent the dog from shadowing you around for part of the time you're at home. Keep him behind a baby gate in part of the house for short periods or in another room, with frequent visits
- 10) Keep Greetings Low Key:** This will help reduce contrast between when you're there (heaven) and when you're not (the abyss). Also, don't smother the dog with too much attention. Try to incorporate toys into your interactions and play