

## Separation Anxiety

### What is separation anxiety?

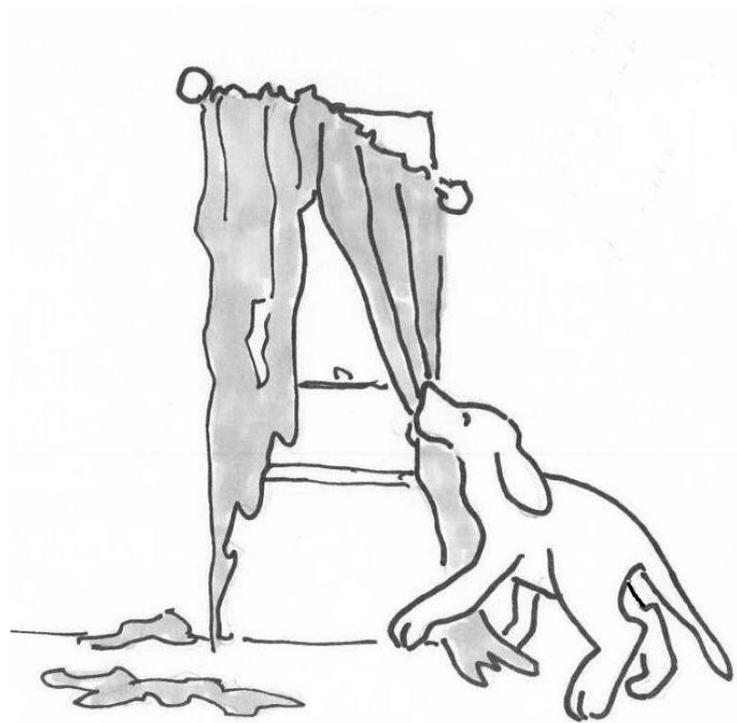
Separation anxiety is a condition where your dog suffers a panic attack because you, the owner, have left the home. The destructive behavior that occurs when he is left alone causes considerable damage as he tries anything to get out and find you, his person.

### 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 will bark and 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 more and more 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 during their puppy days. If there is a history of past abandonment, multiple owners, re-homing issues and/or a traumatic event in the dog’s early life, there is a strong possibility that separation anxiety will be an issue for the dog.

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 literally 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 owner is present the destructive behaviors do not occur. It is only when the owner 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 owner-related item—shoes, bedding.
- Somewhat excessive greeting.
- Some shadowing of the owner.

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

- The dog may continuously bark, whine or howl after the owner 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 owner'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 owner returns, even after a short absence.
- There is almost constant shadowing of the owner as she goes from room to room in the house.

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 that the dog has to learn that being alone is not something to be afraid of. It is not a reason to panic. His owner will return. He can survive. He can't learn this on his own. You have to teach him. It is a long, hard, frustrating experience and at times may seem never ending. 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 will most likely require some medication to help the dog calm down during the beginning phases of the treatment program.



**Licensed Professional Behaviorist/Trainer:** If your dog has separation anxiety, one of the most important steps you can take is to find a competent, licensed, professional trainer (Certified Animal Behaviorist or Certified Professional Dog Trainer) who has experience with behavior issues in general anxiety and, in particular, separation anxiety. A behavior trainer will set up a program based on what your dog needs and, most importantly, she 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, cheering you on and finding solutions when you hit a plateau and don't seem to be making any progress. Yes it will cost some money, but it is well spent because it is unlikely you will be able to relieve your dog's anguish without professional help.

### What can I expect?

Treatment for separation is very complex and time consuming. The program will have specific steps or phases which must be followed in order and requires considerable engagement from you, his guardian.

**Time Commitment:** The program requires a substantial time commitment that includes **daily** practice sessions with your dog, communicating with your trainer at least 2-3 times a week and the program duration can be from 6-8 weeks up to 4-6 months, depending on the severity of the anxiety.

**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.

**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 owner 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.

### Will treatment work?

**Yes!** Separation anxiety is treatable and the treatment does work. It is most successful when you (the owner) have a qualified trainer and vet at your side and you are ready to commit to suspending absences, do 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, then it can be successful.

### **Behavior Modification Program Overview:**

The behavior modification program that your trainer develops for your dog needs to be carried out in an orderly, phased manner. The objective during the early phase is that your dog learns to relax while you are in the home, but not necessarily in the same room with him. Each phase of the program introduces new situations for the dog to experience in a controlled setting so he can learn to relax as you go out of sight, and eventually through the door and leave. A new phase cannot be started until the dog is completely relaxed with the situations introduced and practiced in the previous phase.

### **Core Techniques of a Behavior Modification Program:**

Two behavior modification techniques are at the core of the program. In a separation anxiety treatment program these two techniques are used together.

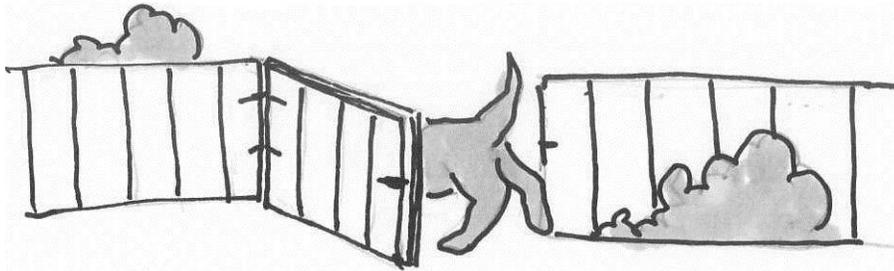
- **Counter-conditioning:** You reward your dog whenever he encounters the anxiety producing stimulus (your leaving), so he will begin to associate a pleasant feeling with it instead of an anxious feeling. The reward is usually a very tasty, high-value treat.
- **Desensitization:** You expose your dog to the anxiety producing situation at a non-anxiety producing level. You give your dog a chance to get used to the situation. For separation anxiety this can be and often is a painstakingly slow process. The stimulus (your leaving) is introduced at whatever level the dog can handle without producing any signs of stress. You probably start in the same room, right next to him, and then take one step back and then return to him right away. And you will practice it over and over again before you increase it to two steps; always making sure your dog is below his anxiety threshold. The distance away is increased by inches rather than feet. Duration is increased by seconds rather than minutes. This is where the advice of your professional will be most appreciated!

### **Goals of a Behavior Modification Program:**

The ultimate goal of the separation anxiety program is to eliminate your dog's panic reaction when you leave him alone. That panic is based in fear. One way to overcome fear is to build confidence. As your dog's confidence increases during the course of the program, by his own choice, he won't follow you around everywhere in the house. He is becoming independent. But these exercises to build confidence and then independence need to be practiced over and over again.

- **Building confidence:** In all phases, but especially in the early phase of the behavior modification program, you are working to build the dog's confidence. You will do this by teaching him new behaviors that he will later learn to use to calm and soothe himself when you leave the house.
- **Distance, duration and distractions:** Your goal during the training program is to increase the tolerance level of your dog to each of these training goals. However, you must remember to train them one at a time. You can't work on distance and duration during the same exercise. You can put them together after your dog has learned to tolerate each one. If you are working on increasing distance, you usually need to increase the distance by inches, not feet! If you are working on duration, the increments are in seconds, not minutes! When you start training for distractions you will start with "easy" ones such as clapping your hands, bending over or eating something.

- **Take it slooow!** Patience is vital to the success of this program. **It cannot be emphasized enough** → This aspect of the training is so important. Take it slowly so your dog does not become stressed and anxious. Remember, 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.



### **Behavior Modification Program Sample:**

It is important to note that what follows is just a possible program setup to give you some idea of the scope and sequence of a behavior modification program for separation anxiety. Every case is different and the exact phases and components of a program and the timing of each phase will depend on many factors. After interviewing you and observing your dog, your trainer will develop a treatment plan that she feels is viable. The expectation is that it will work. But success requires a commitment to see it through, with all the bumps and stops, to the end.

#### **Phase 1: Let's get started!**

The challenge with your separation anxiety dog is that by the time you are ready to leave, he is already stressed and anxious. So the first part of the counter-conditioning/desensitizing regimen is to teach your dog to really relax when you are there. You can do this by doing the following:

- **Go to Bed:** First you will teach your dog the cue "Go to Bed."
- **Relax and Stay:** When he knows how to do that, then you will teach him "Relax and Stay."
- **Sloowly Increase Distance & Duration:** Baby steps! Increase the distance you are from the bed while he is relaxing and staying (measured in inches). Then increase the duration of his "Relax and Stay" (measured in seconds).

You are ready to move on to the next phase when you can send your dog to his bed from five feet away and he can relax and stay there for ten to twenty seconds.

#### **Phase 2: Now he sees you, now he almost doesn't!**

**Setup:** Use x-pens or baby gates to create a confinement area. This is the area your dog will learn to stay in when you leave (eventually). Your professional trainer will help you set it up.

**Using an Interactive Food Toy:** The purpose of the interactive food toy is to help your dog learn to relax when alone, not learn to eat when alone. Therefore, at the beginning of this phase it will be important to return to him after the food is gone, but before any signs of anxiety have begun. This is how he will learn that it is okay when the food runs out. It must be done in small increments of time.

**Training:** Remember, these steps are a very important building block for the next phase when you introduce out of sight absences. So be patient with each step and practice each of the steps below until successful before moving to the next.

- **Step 1:** Introduce an interactive food toy while you are there with the gate open.
- **Step 2:** Move next to the closed gate, and then away from the gate, but still in view.
- **Step 3:** Next you are in view but partially obstructed (behind a counter or in a doorway).
- At ANY sign of anxiety, return to prior step and practice some more!

You can see how the situations get a little harder for your dog in very small increments and each step is practiced over and over again. This is very important for the success of the program. You must also become very good at noticing any early signs of stress in your dog as these exercises become more challenging for your dog.

By the end of this phase your dog needs to be relaxed while you are still in view, but partially obstructed, for about 30 minutes. Just think, you can be reading across the room in your favorite chair or working at your desk without your dog getting anxious!

### **Phase 3: Out of sight, out of mind?**

This is a very big deal that really tests the training from Phases 1 & 2! Moving out of sight while your dog is in his confinement area and going in and out of an opened front door can be significantly stressful to your dog and may require refresher training and Phase 2.

- **Step 1:** You move out of sight, then you come right back into view. Do this nonchalantly without good-byes or hellos or other hullabaloo! Do it over and over varying the duration each time.
- **Step 2:** Front door practice consists of you going in and out of an opened front door—no closing the door yet. Just in and out, over and over. No drama, no trauma!

When your dog can stay relaxed while you are out of sight, but still in the house, for 30 minutes, and he can tolerate you going in and out of an opened front door, then you have successfully completed the program up to this point.

**This is significant!** It means that you can do things in the house without your dog constantly following you around. He doesn't see you, yet he is quiet and content. A major breakthrough, but more hard work is ahead.

### **Phase 3: Now you are really gone!**

Now comes the hard part! Your dog has to become comfortable with you walking in and out the front door – now we close the door.

- **Step 1:** Go out, close the door and immediately open the door and return.
- **Step 2:** Gradually build up the length of time you are gone. At first you are increasing the time in seconds. Don't be tempted to go too fast.

Later in this phase you will start to incorporate desensitizing your dog to your departure cues, such as getting your keys. Your professional trainer will help you understand and incorporate your many and

varied departure cues into the modification program. You've reached a major milestone when you can be gone from the house for 30 minutes! You can talk to a neighbor out front, walk to the mailbox, or run a very quick errand!

***Phase 4: Change it up a bit!***

Other scenarios can be added to the routine here. For example, when your dog is solid at ten minutes alone, you leave for ten minutes and the dog walker comes and takes your dog for his walk. Then the walker returns to your house, leaves the dog and within ten minutes you return. These scenarios need to be precisely timed and coordinated and used with the trainer's advice on timing and placement within the behavior modification program.

***The end is in sight – do NOT rush to the finish!***

This is a point where you may be tempted to up the pace and try a night out with friends! It is especially important not to give in to that impulse!

- ***Continue to move in gradual increments:*** You still need to gradually increase your gone time, but in somewhat larger chunks—from 3-5 minute chunks up to 15-30 minute chunks.
- ***Continue to practice, practice, and then practice:*** You still need to maintain a practice schedule for these longer absences to make sure your dog is really desensitized to them.
- ***Start thinking about your end-goal and planning needs:*** Many separation anxiety dog owners have a goal of being able to be gone for up to four hours. For many people this means hiring a reliable dog walker to give your dog a walk in the middle of the day. But he will be a confident and happy dog, not a panic stricken one.

There are many points along the way in a separation anxiety behavior modification program where failure may seem imminent. This is why it is so important to have a trainer working with you who has experience with separation anxiety. You will reach plateaus all along the way where you will think progress has stopped; we aren't getting anywhere or making any more improvement. This can be especially baffling when it happens near what seems to be the end of the program, when you are getting close to where you need to be. You will need a trainer who can problem solve, review what has happened with your dog in the past and then come up with a solution to get over the wall.

**When and why I should consider medication?**

Medications may be necessary for a severe case of separation anxiety. If your dog is showing signs of stress while you are present—pacing, following you everywhere, startling at every movement you or a family member makes—then he may need medication. The medicines can help take the edge off your dog's anxiety. He will not be able to learn any new behaviors if he is in a constant state of anxiety and stress.

Discuss the use of medication with your behavior trainer, in addition to your vet, to see if the addition of medication is appropriate for your dog's behavior program. It is important to note that these drugs are NOT sedatives intended to make your dog sleepy. They are specifically used to help lower your dog's anxiety level.

***Types of Prescription Medications and Uses:***

There are two groups of drugs generally prescribed for separation anxiety: Anti-Depressants and Sedatives.

***Anti-Depressants:*** These work by affecting the serotonin levels in the brain. Higher levels of serotonin are associated with mood stabilization. Some important information to know:

- They are not sedatives and are not habit forming.
- They have been heavily researched and are considered safe and effective.
- They can reduce your dog's overall anxiety but won't change other aspects of his personality.
- They need to be used together with a behavior modification program.
- Your dog will likely be weaned off the drug as progress is made with the behavior modification program.
- They take several weeks to get into your dog's system at high enough levels to be effective, so improvement is not immediate.

The two most commonly used, which have been approved by the FDA for use in dogs with separation anxiety are:

- ***Clomicalm:*** Has been in use for a long time. Some of the side effects such as lethargy seem to go away after one to two weeks. However, it is processed through a dog's liver and kidneys, so if your dog is kept on it for a longer time, regular blood work should be done to monitor liver and kidney functions.
- ***Reconcile (Prozac):*** Studies indicate that the use of Reconcile in conjunction with a behavior modification program substantially increases the rate of improvement. Loss of appetite is the most common side effect and it usually goes away within the first few weeks of treatment.
- ***Others:*** There are some other antidepressants which have not been specifically approved for use in dogs, but which your vet may recommend. They are Buspar, Paxil, Zoloft and Elavil.

***Sedatives:*** These drugs are usually fast acting, nervous system depressants with a short duration. They may be recommended by your vet to be used at the beginning of the program while waiting for the antidepressants to take effect. Some of these drugs are Valium and Xanax. Your dog's reaction to any sedative should be monitored closely because some dogs will have the opposite reaction to the drug and actually become more anxious and stressed.

***Alternatives and/or Complements to Prescription Medications:***

***Natural Remedies:*** Some mild separation anxiety cases may benefit from natural remedies. The best source for information about these natural remedies is from a holistic veterinarian. The vet will be able to recommend possible combinations of remedies and the proper dosages for your dog. These medications have shown some promise in relieving anxiety in dogs:

- ***L-theanine (Anxitane):*** Is an amino acid that has been widely studied and used to reduce mental and physical stress and also improve attention and mood.
- ***Alpha.casozepine (Zylkene/lactium):*** Is derived from a protein in cow's milk and has shown some results in reducing fear and anxiety in dogs.

- **Others:** DAP (dog appeasing pheromone), Rescue Remedy and Pulsatilla. The record for these natural medications is less promising. They seem to work for some dogs, but not for others.

#### **Other Tools Used in a Behavior Modification Program:**

**Calming products:** There are many products on the market which can sometimes help a separation anxiety dog calm down. Care must be taken in using these products. If the product is only used when you leave, then it will soon become yet another departure cue and lead to stress and anxiety. Talk to your professional trainer if you want to incorporate any of these products into your program:

- **ThunderShirt:** body wrap for the dog.
- **ThunderCap:** Covers the eyes and reduces visual stimulation.
- **TTouch Massage:** Massage techniques to help your dog get into a relaxed state prior to absence rehearsals.
- **Through a Dog's Ear:** Music CDs to help a dog settle and relax.

**Technology:** The use of technology has added a new, helpful dimension to the treatment of separation anxiety. Webcams and smartphones can aid in communicating with your trainer as well as in the training and monitoring of your dog. There is even an interactive treat dispensing toy that can be triggered remotely up to 100 feet away as you monitor your dog on a smartphone or tablet.

**Enrichment Toys:** Kongs, treat dispensing balls and toys are an important part of the program, even though in many moderate and severe cases the dog won't take food when the owner is gone. But these toys will be used in a way to create a positive association with the confinement area. They also help build confidence in the dog as he figures out and is successful at getting the food out. The remote-control, interactive toy (Treat & Train) is noisy, so your dog will have to be desensitized to it so he isn't scared by it. But he will quickly learn to love it. All of these toys are first introduced to the dog while you are there, so he learns to love the toys and the confinement area.

**Management Tools:** Baby gates and x-pens are other important tools you will need. The purpose is to create a safe, comfortable and pleasant confinement area for your dog. Your trainer can help you decide where and how to set up your confinement area.

#### **Training Resources:**

Marin Humane's **Behavior & Training** conducts various training classes. Sign up on our [Behavior & Training](#) page for the next available class series.

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or [OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org](mailto:OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org).

**Remember to license your dog (It's the LAW)!** If your dog gets lost, a license tag on your dog's collar is the fastest way to reunite you and your dog. Even if your dog is microchipped, a license tag is immediately visible and doesn't require a scanning device to read. For more information about licensing, microchipping, and other services provided by **Marin Humane**, visit us at [MarinHumane.org](http://MarinHumane.org) or stop by at 171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Novato, CA.

