

Caring for a Dog with Separation Stress

Dogs who are anxious or stressed when left alone can exhibit a variety of challenging behaviors. No matter how severe, they can be difficult to change as they occur primarily when you are not with your dog. Behaviors can range from pacing and whining to barking, chewing, and eliminating, and can be as significant as breaking out of a crate or through a window. Each of these behaviors indicates some level of distress, and without intervention will likely persist or worsen. The following recommendations should be combined with the help of a qualified behaviorist to support you and your dog.

Do not leave your dog home alone: For dogs experiencing separation anxiety, there is typically no difference between being left alone for 10 minutes or for 2 hours. The chain of “anxious” behaviors begins long before you actually leave the house – when you put your shoes on, or when you pick up your keys – so the duration of time alone is irrelevant. If your dog exhibits anxious or destructive behaviors when alone, it is imperative that they are not left alone and allowed to practice those behaviors while learning an alternative, more relaxed set of behaviors. While disruptive to your schedule, the more your dog practices those unwanted behaviors, the harder it will be to change them. Some options to consider for when you do need to leave the house during this learning stage include: dog daycare (if your dog is friendly with other dogs), a pet sitter in your home or in their home, or a day boarding facility. For short trips like to the grocery store or to run an errand, consider bringing your dog along and leaving them in the car if they are comfortable there (weather permitting).

Reinforce calm behavior as often as possible, ignore “velcro dog” behavior: For dogs that are anxious when alone, the first step is to teach them to be comfortable resting away from you, even when you are home. It might make you feel really good to have a dog that wants to be right by your side everywhere you go, but it’s important for them to practice being more confident and independent. Anytime you see your dog standing, sitting or lying away from you, go to them and pet for at least 20 seconds (note: use a petting consent test first!). Anytime you notice your dog following you around and staying right by your side, ignore them – don’t ask to go lay down, lead them back to their bed, or give eye contact, as all of those things will reinforce staying close to you. This will help teach that calm, independent and relaxed behavior gets your attention, whereas velcro, clingy behavior does not.

Practice walking out of the house: It is nearly impossible for your dog to go from being very anxious to calm while you’re away – instead, you’ll want them to begin with a calm dog and help them remain calm throughout the duration of your time away. Starting with a calm dog, begin practicing walking toward the door while your dog stays relaxed, then return to pet your dog. Next, go all the way to the door (return to pet), and then touch the door (return to pet), and then jiggle the door knob, then turn the door knob, then open the door just a crack...etc. Remember to break everything down into **very small, achievable steps**, returning to reinforce calm behavior between each step. If your dog gets up or is no longer relaxed, you went too fast! Go back to where they were last successful and try again with smaller, easier steps. Once you can open the door all the way, practice stepping outside with one foot, then go all the way outside, then go outside and start to close the door, then go out and close the door all the way, then very gradually increase the number of seconds you can stand outside with the door closed. Remember, if your dog gets up or upset, you went too fast. Try not to come back to your dog when he gets upset. If you pushed too far, come back in when he is quiet and ignore him – go into another room and begin another task, but never punish or scold your dog during these exercises.

Coming home: It’s our tendency to be really excited to see our pets after a long day at work. For dogs that are sensitive to being alone, being enthusiastic when you walk in the room can make that sensitivity worse. If possible, avoid coming into the house when your dog is upset. If they are barking or whining, try to wait for a moment of quiet before entering. When you enter, remain as **neutral** as possible. You can calmly and matter-of-factly greet them but don’t stop to pet or talk in an excited voice. Ignore your dog until **completely relaxed**, then go to them to pet and tell them about your day.

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Remove predictability: Our dogs quickly learn that when you put on your shoes and grab your car keys, you're getting ready to head out the door. Do your best to keep your routine as random and unpredictable as possible. Don't do things in the same order every day. Throughout the day, pick up your keys and then set them back down and sit on the couch. Put your shoes on and then go upstairs to change your clothes. Do the things that seem to predict that you are leaving throughout the day when you are not actually leaving, effectively removing the predictability in your leaving behavior.

Never punish a dog for their behavior when they are experiencing separation stress or distress.

They aren't destroying the sofa or peeing/pooping in the house as an act of revenge or because they are misbehaving – they are experiencing an unmanageable amount of distress or panic. Punishment in those cases will likely make the behaviors worse, and increase the amount of anxiety or panic surrounding being alone. It can increase general stress and anxiety, and can make them afraid of you.

When to reach out for help: If you have tried the suggestions above and are still finding that your dog is struggling to be alone, please contact the adoption center from which you adopted your dog for more support. You may need to work with a qualified behaviorist or veterinary behaviorist. Medication in addition to a behavior modification plan will give your dog the best chance at success.

DOs	DO NOTs
<p>DO Start with Short absences and build up gradually as long as your dog is not showing signs of stress.</p> 	<p>DO NOT Scold or punish your dog. They are not misbehaving or acting out of spite.</p> 
<p>DO Exercise with your dog and provide daily enrichment. Providing affection and attention does not cause separation anxiety.</p> 	<p>DO NOT Use Equipment that might be painful or scary. These will only mask symptoms of anxiety and can actually increase your dog's fear of being alone.</p> 
<p>DO Utilize an expert daycare or pet sitter until your dog is comfortable alone at home.</p> 	<p>DO NOT leave your dog in a crate if they haven't learned to relax while left alone in confinement.</p> 
<p>DO Contact your veterinarian and a professional trainer.</p> 	<p>DO NOT Leave your dog alone for any longer than they are comfortable. They will not just "get over it".</p> 



Virtual Training Courses:

Malena DeMartini - malenademartini.com

Calm Canine Academy - calmcanineacademy.com/separation-skills

Recommended Reading:

Be Right Back by Julie Naismith

Don't Leave Me - Step-By-Step Help for Your Dog's Separation Anxiety by Nicole Wilde

I'll be Home Soon: How to Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety by Patricia McConnell, Ph.D.