

# Separation Anxiety in Dogs

## How does separation anxiety happen?

Separation anxiety and related problems – usually occur to dogs that are overly attached and dependent to their owners. Also it can occur to recently separated puppies from the litter and mom. Basically, the dog becomes so overly attached to its owner that once it is left alone it feels immense tension and panic; this then demonstrates itself in numerous undesirable ways. Dogs with separation anxiety may show one or several of the following symptoms during the absence of the owner, such as: excessive barking or whining, soiling indoors, destructiveness.

Separation anxiety is a behavioral problem that most owners don't tolerate for long, as it is difficult to live with. Unfortunately and un-knowingly, owners often make the problem worse by expressing their own frustrations on their dog after returning home or waking up in the morning to discover the mess – sticking its nose in its feces, shouting at the dog, even hitting it or chasing it. As a consequence, not only the dog gets anxious about the owner going to bed or leaving but is also anxious about what will happen to it when its owner gets wake up in the morning or get home. Just as we humans seek many anxiety relief ways, so dogs crave a release from their stress too. However a dog most of the time need the help of its owner to distress either on a long walk or run, or even in a few minutes of calm stroking. A dog's natural response to tension and fear, then, is to chew, scratch, soil or make noise; and the problem promptly turns into an endless vicious circle.

The best way to solve this problem is to address the root cause of the problem, which is a dogs over-attachment to the owners.



## What causes over-Attachment?

Almost consistently you find that separation anxiety suffering dogs are given a huge amount of attention. It mostly happens when the owners are at work for most of the day and they feel guilty for leaving the dog alone for so long. They feel guilty and feel that they need to compensate by giving the dog extra attention and affection when they get home. Separation anxiety is also common in families where there are no children and the dog is treated as a substitute to a child, sleeping on the sofa, bed and other furniture, being fed lots of treats and off the table human food, and being encouraged to follow its owner everywhere.

Every owner enjoys the warm feeling they get from having their dog's unconditional love. Dogs greatly enjoy the immense love and attention too, but too much of a good thing can be bad! This causes the Dogs not only become overly attached and clingy but usually also develop dominance issues because they have unlimited pleasures and are never asked to work for any of them. In simple words they get spoiled similar to a human child.

Regrettably, this causes an increased and severe case of anxiety: not only is the dog anxious when its owner is gone but as the perceived leader of the family pack it also feels a dire sense of responsibility and need to do something about the situation. The problem is, the dog wouldn't know what or how and as a result it becomes even more and more anxious.

## ***What can be done?***

Separation anxiety can be tackled in many ways however my favorite approach is as follows. An initial "Immediate solution" will help you outline and execute the next stage of a long-term solution to the problem.

### **Immediate solution**

As an immediate action will you will need to create the least threatening environment for your dog and an environment that is easier to control, clean and manage. Minimize the damage-zone, mess and noise that your dog can cause while you out of the house or in bed. That may mean crating your dog (this is not acceptable as an all day measure) or confining him to just one area or room of the house where he is able to cause the least amount of damage and it is relatively easier for the owner to clean up any accidents such as soiling. Provide your dog with a good selection and choice of good quality chew toys; food stuffed "Kongs" are normally a good distraction. It's always a good idea to have a chat with your neighbors and explain why your dog is making so much noise and ask for their patience while you tackle the problem. If possible, get someone to visit your dog at while you are out to give your dog some attentiveness and exercise.

### **Long-term solution**

Together with a more immediate solution and set of actions you still have to address some more fundamental issues in solving the problem on the long run. As a starting point you have to cool off the over attachment problem which was created between you as an owner and your dog.

Make sure you have frequent, but initially short sessions with your dog; times when you entirely overlook your dog and just get on with your regular day-to-day routines. Even if your dog is stuck to your side or barking & whining for attention, you must not talk or respond to your dog, or even pet him or look at him. Then, in your own time and when you are ready – and when your dog is relaxed, calm and quiet; call him to you, ask him for a "sit" command and give him some attention.

If you follow the above scenario firmly and without making any communication at all with your dog during 'time-out', you should get to a stage where your dog is not tailing you around so much and you can progressively increase the "time-out" periods where you overlook or ignore him. In the case that your dog is still continuously following you, then you could use a child gate or long garden leash to partition off one room or garden area in the house. Don't make any fuss of him when you decide to leave the room or leash him. Walk away calmly and steadily from the gated or the leashed dog, leave him behind you without looking back at him, completely disregarding any jumping, barking, whining or any other anxious behavior. After returning or passing by the gated or leashed dog continue to completely overlooking him for at least 5 minutes or as long as it takes for him to calm down. Once he's calm and relaxed then call him to you and give him some quiet and mature praise.

At this stage you need to progressively build up the interval of time you leave your dog whereas you are still in the house, moving onto longer stretches of separation only when he is calm and comfortable (not barking, whining, or being destructive) at a shorter one. When you reach up to 30 minutes separation periods "time out" while you are in the house, you may then start leaving the house for short stretches of time (you can start with 5 or 10 minutes and again progressively building up), again, following the same technique of not making any fuss of your dog when you leave from or return to the house. With a bit of patience and consistency, soon enough your dog will realize that his world can still go on when you are not there and can be fairly happy with his own company.

## **Establish Yourself As Pack Leader**

As cited above, anxiety is often increased when dogs have unintentionally been given the message that they are the pack leader. How can they protect the pack when a part of the pack leaves the house without them? Just a few minor changes can be made to your regular day-to-day routine you can noticeably demonstrate to your dog that you are the alpha and in charge. Dominant examples include feeding your dog after you have eaten, not allowing your dog to lie on any of your furniture including your bed and sofa, you can also make sure that your dog always does something for you before you give him the attention, even if it is just a simple sit. Also using child gates to restrict your dog's access to certain areas of the house and garden. It is also essential to engage your dog in a short, daily training routine. You need to calm your relationship down with your dog: build periods of time during the day where you intentionally overlook your dog so that he realizes that your being around doesn't necessarily mean that he will get attention. Once your dog realizes that he is not the pack leader and he doesn't need to assume that role of dominance, he will noticeably relax and accept your frequent or random absence.

## **Exercise – A tired dog is a happy dog**

A tired dog is a happy dog, that's what they say. It makes sense that a tired dog that just had a long walk early in the morning is most probably going to spend the rest of the morning settling down and resting once his owner leaves the house. If you have to go to work early and leave your dog in the house unattended for a lengthy period of time, make sure you get out early in the morning with your dog before you go to work. It's further advisable and if doable; have a friend, neighbor or dog-walker to see the dog during your absence to take your dog for another short walk. Even if you are at home all day, routine physical exercise will provide your dog with the positive attentiveness he desires as well as vital mental and physical stimulus that will leave him feeling more relaxed and calm when home.