

Separation Anxiety in Dogs

One of the greatest joys of dog ownership is the tight bond we experience and encourage with our dogs. However, if your dog becomes *too* reliant or dependent on you, Dog Separation Anxiety can occur when you and your dog are apart.

Your dog is distressed when you leave the house. How do we know? It has been barking – A Lot.

You may not even be aware of the problem – since you aren't around to witness it yourself – but those of us who are – including your dog – need you to take time to read this and try to work to resolve the problem.

Don't worry, Separation Anxiety doesn't mean you're a "nasty owner". It's because your dog has such a tight bond with you - that's part of the problem. And you're not alone, it's actually the most common behavioural problem in dogs - effecting around 10% of all puppies and older dogs.

Sadly it is a common reason people are forced to give up their pets. I wish I could say it is easily fixed, but in many cases it is a difficult behavioural problem to overcome.

Look At It From Your Dog's Perspective

To your dog, you are the most important thing in his/her world. Dogs are pack animals who are very sociable creatures and thrive on company for many reasons. It's only natural that when you go out, your dog experiences varying degrees of distress or anxiety. He becomes confused, doesn't know where you are going, why he can't be with you and if you will be coming back to him. When you are separated all he wants is to be reunited with his pack - which is you.

Leaving a dog alone, when he/she is distressed is one of the worst things a dog can experience. Did you know a dog would rather be beaten than be abandoned? He / she would take the beating just so his / her master will come back! I hope this illustrates how distressed these animals can be and how important it is to really fix the problem.



How Does Separation Anxiety In Dogs Manifest?

Your dog has been reported as barking excessively while you are away from the house but separation anxiety can also show itself in these other “problem” behaviours. Perhaps you have noticed some of them too? If not, you’re lucky and treating the anxiety may prevent the condition from getting worse and these other problems starting.

whining	howling
destructive behaviour	self mutilation
chewing	“frantic” digging
trying to escape from the house / yard,	jumping up at windows
inappropriate urinating	house soiling
loss of appetite	diarrhoea,
excessive salivation	vomiting

Why Do Dogs Experience Separation Anxiety?

There are many theories about what can cause separation anxiety:

After a change in routine, like changing your work hours or a family member leaves home, after the dog experiences a traumatic event while on his own, like a thunder storm, if your dog is rarely left alone and becomes overly reliant on his human family. Dogs rescued from animal shelters are more likely to suffer with it. But it doesn’t really matter what “started” the problem, we need to know how to fix it.

What Can You Do To Help Your Dog Overcome Separation Anxiety?

Punishment will not work, your dog would prefer you to come back and punish it than remain alone. Punishment will make your dog more nervous and therefore the separation anxiety worse

– don’t do it.

The treatment administered to your dogs Separation Anxiety problem depends on its severity. A mild case of Separation Anxiety in dogs will be easily fixed by applying some of the proven methods listed below. More severe cases will take lots of time and commitment, and possibly a visit to your Vet for some medication. Starting these behavioural training tips as soon as the problem is noticed and being dedicated to trying to help your dog will give your the best chance of success.



TOP TIPS!

General obedience training. Teach and practice some basic obedience training commands like sit, down and stay. Be a strong leader or the "Alpha Dog" in your owner-dog relationship, your dog will respect and trust you for it. When you establish yourself as the trusted leader, your dog will respect your right to come and go as you please. When people treat their dogs like "babies", the dog does not gain any confidence, doesn't see you as a confident leader and this creates a sense of confusion in the way the dog sees the "pack" structure (i.e. your household).

Be sure to give your dog plenty of exercise when you are around. On leash walks, a run on open land with other dogs and some obedience training will all ensure your dog is happy and stimulated. Importantly it can also mean your dog will rest while you are out, instead of tearing up the garden etc.

Lend your dog to friends or neighbours. This helps socialise the dog with others and is an excellent temporary solution to their distress when you can't be around – until the anxiety is treated.

Ensure that your dog feels safe and comfortable when you are away from him. Provide plenty of fresh water and clean, warm bedding for your dog.

Provide some appealing dog toys to help occupy his time – "Kongs" stuffed with frozen treats are a good idea or other chew toys.

Leave your dog a blanket or piece of clothing that has your scent on it. This may comfort your distressed dog - make sure it is something you don't mind being torn up.

Try feeding your dog his/her main meal just as you are leaving the house, this distracts attention away from you leaving and helps associate your leaving with something "yummy".

If you often have the radio on when at home, leave it on while you are away. This can be soothing and comforting in mild cases of Separation Anxiety in dogs.

Some dog owners report that buying another puppy or cat can help reduce Separation Anxiety. – this may work but not without other training too, as it is likely to reduce boredom but won't stop your dog from missing you when you are apart.

Try leaving your dog in a safe and secure crate or kennel run. This can have a two fold effect, it provides a comfortable "den like" area where your dog will feel comfortable, and it means your dog won't be able to act out many of the problem behaviours' listed above. Be sure that your dog is completely happy in this area before you go and leave him for any length of time – if your dog is not happy in the "den" he/she may start seeing it as punishment.



I appreciate this one is difficult for many dog owners but don't let your dog become too "clingy" and dependent on you when you're together. Little by little teach your dog to be on his own when you are home. Put him in a crate, outside or just in the next room. Prove to him that it's not a bad thing to be separated from you, give him his favourite treat in another room and leave him there for a while. When he is quiet and calm go and give him some praise, make it clear you are happy with him. You can also practice your sit-down-stay obedience training commands for this purpose.

Some trainers recommend the use of No Bark collars. These are an effective tool for stopping excessive barking problems. But remember, your dog is barking because he is suffering from Separation Anxiety– the no-barking collars will be punishing your dog for feeling nervous. It is likely that the barking will cease, but it won't help your dog's fear of being alone – it is likely the anxiety will get worse and the dog will replace barking with other destructive behavioural problems.

Pay little or no attention to your dog when preparing to leave the house. Ignore him for 10 minutes and then slip out the door with no fuss. Do the same when you arrive back home, just go about your business for about 10 minutes, ignore your dog completely. When he is calm, initiate some contact with him. You don't want him to believe that his behaviour (barking, whining, chewing etc.) has contributed to bringing you back home. If you give a big greeting every time you arrive back home, you will be inadvertently rewarding his bad behaviour when you were out.



The 4 Step Program To Fix My Dog's Separation Anxiety Problem

by Chris Smith

My Dalmatian, Harrison developed Separation Anxiety seemingly for no reason when he was about 7 years old. He would start digging and crying as soon as I left the house, even if my other family members were home. My Veterinarian suggested this training process; it achieved the desired result but took plenty of time and patience.

Aside from the 4 step program listed below, I continued to practice the general day to day duties of responsible dog ownership. By this I mean things like providing a safe and comfortable bed, plenty of exercise and obedience training.

Harry would start to get anxious (his whole body would shake) at the very first sign of me leaving the house. This typically would be putting my shoe's on or turning off the TV or heater. It became a real problem for Harry, myself and the rest of my family, this is how we eventually solved it:

Step 1

Since Harry was always by my side when I was home I had to slowly teach him that he didn't always need to be close to me. I started out by ignoring his attention seeking behaviour (jumping up, barking etc.) and then did some solid practice of his down stay. Little by little we extended the time and distance we spent apart, until he was happy to be alone for up to 30 minutes. Of course, we still spent lots of fun time together.

Step 2

The next step was to get him used to being outside while I was inside. Again we started off with very small periods apart and gradually lengthened the time over a couple of weeks. If you try this Separation Anxiety in dogs treatment make sure that you don't just leave your dog outside to get all worked up and stressed. The trick is to start out leaving your dog out for a few seconds, then going out and reuniting before he shows any signs of Separation Anxiety. Give your dog a treat or dog toy to keep his mind off missing you. Only initiate contact with your dog when he is calm and quiet.

Step 3

The next step in fixing Harry's Separation Anxiety in dogs problem was to eliminate the distress caused by me getting ready to leave the house for work. What I did was write a list of all the triggers that started Harry's anxiety. I then set about desensitizing him to these triggers. I'd put my shoe's on, and not go anywhere. Put my coat on, then sit down to read the paper. Pick up my car keys and just carry them around with me, jangling along as I went about my business. After a while (about 3 weeks) Harry barely offered a sideways glance at my shenanigans.



Step 4

When Harry was completely calm in situations that would have unsettled him in the past, I left the house. At first I just stepped outside, shut the door and came back inside within 20 seconds - before he made a sound. Again this was a slow process, similar to step 2. I extended the time outside the front door and then graduated to starting the car, then driving around the block before I came back inside. You can provide a tasty treat to your dog on your way out the door, something that he can work on for a while. Harry's favourite was a frozen Kong stuffed full of peanut butter and a few liver treats, this eventually kept him occupied for hours. Remember that when you return home, don't make a huge fuss. Come inside, get changed, pour yourself a nice hot coffee, then greet your calm dog.

This process did prove effective for me and my anxious Dalmatian. All up the 4 steps took about 5 weeks to work through and fix Harry's Separation Anxiety problem. My Vet suggested that I supplement this training with some medication. I didn't go down that path, but it would have been my next step had I required it.

Step 5

Medications: (note from Lana)

Medications should never be used as a substitute for training. Most dogs can be helped without the need to medicate them at all. I would highly recommend dedicated training over drugs. However, if you are travelling to your home country where you could have an assessment by an animal behaviourist / vet there are a couple of products (Clomicalm, Selgian) which may be of use – and I'm not sure if they are available here. Also please remember, not all vets in Riyadh have training in animal behaviour or are familiar with the correct medications to use. Please ask if you would like advice / a second opinion on medications, especially if you are offered medications other than those mentioned above.

GOOD LUCK

PS there's heaps of stuff on the net about separation anxiety if you want more info.

Or contact our recommended dog-owner-trainer Toxi Ludwig (toxi@power.ms) for training help.

Remember- it's not how much you read but how much time you put into the training that will count!

