



RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Separation Anxiety

What is Separation Anxiety?

Conditions necessary to name a behaviour “separation anxiety” include: Physical or behavioural signs of distress exhibited by the animal in the actual absence of their owner. Sufficient conditions include consistent, intensive destruction, elimination, vocalisation or salivation exhibited when the animal has no access to their owner, or their owner is out; behaviours are most severe close to the separation, and many anxiety related behaviours, such as self-motivated hyperactivity, increased motor activity and increased alertness may become apparent as the client exhibits behaviour associated with leaving. This “leaving behaviour” may include the owner showering, getting dressed, collecting belongings or picking up car keys.

(Taken from Overall KL (1997). Clinical Behavioural Medicine for Small Animals., St Louis MO: Mosby).



When to seek the help of a Veterinary Behaviourist?

Speaking to a professional in the area of separation behaviours should not be the last resort. With early intervention, it can make the journey easier on both human and dog. If your dog is hurting himself, or is at risk of hurting himself while separated from you, please seek help from a Veterinary Behaviourist. The training processes detailed below take time to teach and reinforce, if your dog is injuring himself he will need medication coupled with a training program to teach him how to behave when left alone.

Why does my dog do this?

Dogs do not inherently know what to do when they are left on their own. As a result of this uncertainty, they often develop completely inappropriate behaviour when left without direction or company. Anxiety often becomes apparent when circumstances change for dog, such as a companion dying, owners leaving or taking up full time work, or when neighbouring dogs leave the area.

Can this be changed

Yes, these behaviours can be changed by implementing a training program, to make life easier for you and your dog.

As with any behaviour change, the first thing is to try to eliminate the opportunity for our dogs to practice the behaviour we are trying to change. This may mean getting a pet sitter to come in when you are out; enlisting help from your neighbours, family or friends; or taking your dog to a canine day care facility.

You then need to spend some time teaching your dog how to be on their own.



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Can your dog lie quietly on their bed? (see Mat Training, Denning or Crate Training) Does he have enough to do? (See Entertaining Your Dog, Home Alone, Kongs and NILIF). Is he getting adequate exercise? Is he getting too much exercise? Does your dog relax or just get wiped out and exhausted?

Answering these simple questions may help you deal with your dog's behaviour. Some dogs become destructive or vocal because they are bored, not anxious. By ensuring that your dog is adequately exercised and entertained before you go out, you give them a much greater chance of success: they can be taught to engage with their toys/enrichment instead of your outdoor setting.

If providing enrichment does nothing to alter your dog's behaviour, they may be experiencing true separation anxiety. To deal with this you need to teach them how to be on their own: they need to learn that being alone is not scary, and is not actually a problem at all. The method outlined below can be used to teach our dog to cope while we are not home.

Start by preparing to leave the area (including setting out activities for your dog to do). If the dog starts to show anxious behaviours, such as increased panting, increased salivation, pacing, or vocalisation, stop. Don't try to soothe or comfort your dog, just be present without paying them attention of any kind. The next time you attempt this step, only do the first few aspects of your preparation to leave, eg. only change your clothes. Then stop and relax. Wait until your dog has stopped showing signs of stress (eg panting, pacing, etc.) and then continue the process of preparing to leave. When your dog remains calm throughout this process, you may leave the house for five seconds - then come straight back inside with minimal fuss. If you come back inside to a calm dog, you may leave for ten seconds, then fifteen, then thirty. Slowly increase the time you are outside of the house - if you come back inside to find your dog barking, fretting or being destructive, halve the time you spent outside and build up again slowly.

Our aim is for the dog to remain calm at all stages, if there is any increase in anxiety then you are going too fast and doing too much. It's important to keep these sessions short. It will be of much greater benefit to your dog to have two or three sessions of 5-10 minutes over the course of a day, than to have one half hour session, once.

This is just one example of how one practice session could pan out:

- You have a shower and get dressed. Your dog can hear your work shoes (which sound different to your slippers!) and knows that you're about to leave.
 - Noticing this, you sit down in front of the TV (something you don't usually do before you go out) and wait for your dog to settle on the mat beside the couch. You don't interact with your dog - but you stop your "leaving routine" until she calms down. When your dog is calm, you get up and continue collecting the belongings you usually take to work. She observes you doing this from her mat quite calmly, but when you pick up the car keys (which have a distinctive jingle) she begins to pace around the house and pants heavily.
 - You then sit down in the chair next to the door and read a book until she settles again. You don't make a fuss of her, or pay her any attention at all - you simply stop what you are doing.
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- Once your dog is calm, you take off your shoes, put your bag down and continue about your tasks at home as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened.

This example is obviously a fairly anxious dog - however it demonstrates the client beginning to break the dog's cycle of association with certain things occurring. When Mum or Dad puts shoes on and picks up car keys there is no reason to panic!

When you can get to the stage of packing up your things and leaving the house for about 30 seconds without your dog becoming anxious, you are ready to walk a few metres down the road and return. Don't make a fuss of your dog when you come back in, simply wait a few minutes inside and then go out a little further, and return.

When you can go a few houses away and return to a calm dog, you can start trying the same thing with your vehicle. Go outside, get in your car and start the engine. Turn it off and go back inside. Repeat until the dog can stay calm for this process.

The next step is to leave your property (slowly if you have a long driveway) then return immediately. Return inside and then if the dog is OK, you can go a little further and return again.

Gradually build up the amount of time you spend away from the home. When you can spend fifteen minutes away you are on the right track, and you can start telling your dog how well they are doing.

Further help and reading

List of Behaviour Vets in Australia: <https://www.k9events.com/behaviour-vets.html>

Hughes, Emma (Dr), May 2018, So your Dog Doesn't like to be left alone?

<http://www.bbvs.com.au/anxiety/so-your-dog-doesnt-like-to-be-left-alone/>

De Martini-Price, Malena (2017), SEPARATION ANXIETY AND A SECOND DOG - WILL IT HELP?,

<https://malenademartini.com/separation-anxiety-second-dog-will-help/>

De Martini-Price, Malena (2017), Dogwise Publishing, Treating Separation Anxiety in Dogs (Kindle edition), <https://www.amazon.com.au/TREATING-SEPARATION-ANXIETY-Malena-DeMartini-Price-ebook/dp/B00JV9ZSJ4>

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