



Separation Anxiety

What is separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety, in the simplest sense, is a phobia of being left alone. Separation anxiety (SA) can manifest and present itself in several different ways, but regardless of the behaviors presented, it is very stressful for both the dog and the family they are living with.

While separation anxiety is a serious behavior issue, it can be worked with and managed successfully, though it is a process that often requires a lot of time, patience, and some trial and error. A proper set-up, schedule, and living situation are also imperative to the potential success of managing a dog with SA, which means that a dog with SA may not be the best fit for everyone. Things that a dog with SA needs, at least during the initial acclimation and training period include:

- Starting the dog on anti-anxiety medication
- A flexible schedule that allows you to either work from home or to have yourself and/or someone else home with the dog so they are not left alone for any period of time or longer than they can handle
- Very understanding neighbors in case the dog barks for an extended period of time. Apartments and townhouses are not impossible for a dog with SA to live in but are often difficult due to the potential for noise complaints based on barking
- 30 minutes set aside at least 5 days a week to do training

Is it really separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a very serious behavior problem that often requires both behavioral and medical interventions. However, just because your dog barks when you leave the home does not mean they have SA (which is a good thing). Let's look at some common SA type behaviors and break them down.

Barking

If your dog barks, whines, or cries when you leave, they may simply be frustrated that you are no longer home, and that frustration manifests through vocalizations. As long as they are not vocalizing for an excessive amount of time (30 minutes or longer), you likely will be able to curb the behavior by giving them some frozen enrichment item just before you leave, or load up a snuffle mat for them. By doing this, you may distract your dog so that they don't even notice you've left, or if they do, then it gives them something to do after you've gone.

When it's a concern:

If vocalizations last for more than 30 minutes

Destructive chewing

If your dog is chewing up things such as furniture, books, remotes, shoes, or similar household items, this could also be frustration or indicate that your dog is simply bored; however, when bored dogs find things for themselves to do, they are rarely constructive to us. Try either dog-proofing the area that they stay in, removing items that they may grab off low shelves, closing closet doors, installing baby gates, etc., OR consider crating or confining them to smaller portion of the home when you're not around. Make sure that they have plenty of toys available to them, including appropriate chew toys, and try giving them a puzzle feeder with their morning meal to work on by themselves.

When it's a concern:

If your dog is destroying items or areas associated with points of exit and entry such as doors, molding surrounding the doors, walls, windows, blinds, curtains, etc.

Elimination

If you've just adopted your dog or taken in a new foster, eliminating inside the house could be your dog relearning their housetraining. Try crating them or confining to a smaller portion of the home when you're gone, and get them onto a housetraining schedule. You may also consider bringing them to the vet for a check-up to make sure there's nothing occurring medically that may be a potential cause. For example, if your dog has just started new medications, increased urination could be a side effect. Common health issues like UTIs can also cause an increase in urination. Being unable to hold their bowels could be symptomatic of an underlying health issue, and drooling may be a sign of pain.

When it's a concern:

If you see large puddles of saliva, commonly found at points of exit or entry

Self-Injury

Some dogs can become self-injurious when left alone. Typically, this is caused when they try to break out of a crate and they scratch up their face or cut their mouth, or they may cut their mouth when chewing on something else, or jumping and breaking something. You may also see small circular or oval sores on their legs from excessive licking and/or chewing. If your dog is

hurting themselves breaking out of a crate, you can try leaving them free in the home or confined in a room if you trust that they will not hurt themselves further or become destructive.

When it's a concern:

Always. Unless there is a quick fix, like confinement anxiety in the crate that can be remedied by letting them roam free in the house, then you should seek immediate behavioral and medical help to prevent any injuries from either reoccurring or becoming worse.

Social Interaction

Many dogs like to follow and “shadow” you around the house, but it’s likely because they enjoy your company and want to participate in whatever super-fun thing it is that you’re about to do (loading the dishwasher isn’t boring and monotonous for everyone). If your dog approaches you and leans against you, they are probably just soliciting some attention.

When it's a concern

If they are shadowing you excessively and are hyperaware of your every move. If the leaning seems more like they are pinning you into the couch or chair with their body, and/or if they start trying to block you from leaving a room or going through the door to leave the house. These behaviors may also be accompanied with tense and anxious body language.

What next?

If your dog is displaying any of the behaviors above, try the suggestions mentioned after each description to see if that either lessens or solves the issue. It is also recommended that you schedule an appointment with your vet to get a physical exam and bloodwork completed to rule out potential medical issues for the behavior(s). Sometimes a dog who is not feeling well and/or is in pain may develop SA as a result of an underlying medical condition. If the above tips do not work and your dog has been cleared medically OR if your dog falls into any of the “When it’s a concern” categories, then a more intensive approach may be needed.

Getting Started

There are several things to try when working with a dog who is experiencing separation anxiety. Some things may work, other may not, but often the best thing is to try everything listed below to the best of your ability, and determine what works best with your set-up and on a daily basis. The type of behavior that SA is can be seen in the name: Anxiety. A dog experiencing SA is a dog who is having a panic attack whenever you leave or even if they think you may leave. If you or someone you know has ever experienced anxiety like this, then you'll know how difficult it can be to try to manage, to live with, and how it's not always a logical response to a particular problem. Regardless, the panic is there so we need to try to help set our dog up for success the best we can.

1. Anti-Anxiety Medication

If your dog is exhibiting SA, then anti-anxiety medication will need to become part of the plan. *This is non-negotiable.* Just like people with severe anxiety take medication to help manage their stress, the same needs to be done for your dog. This will help reduce their overall stress levels, move them back towards a lower baseline of fear and stress, and help them cope with stress better. While this is only a piece of the puzzle (as are all of these steps), this is a very important piece. Schedule an appointment with your veterinarian, alert them of the SA behaviors that your dog is showing, and request that you would like to start them on anti-anxiety medication. There are several different types of medication that can be prescribed, but in almost every case, you will be given both a short-term, fast-acting medication as well as a longer-term medication that typically takes several weeks to take effect.

2. Structure and Routines

Making your dog's day as structured as possible may help alleviate some of their stress and anxiety. Having a predictable feeding schedule, the same number of walks each day at the same times, designated play and quiet times, etc., may all go a long way for your dog. This doesn't mean they can't have an extra play time or miss a meal by 30 minutes, but be as consistent with your dog's day-to-day as possible. Just like people with anxiety, sometimes having a set routine and knowing what's coming around the corner can make a big difference.

3. Creating a Safe Haven

Create an area for your dog to go to that enables them to be able to remove themselves and be alone whenever they are feeling overwhelmed or fearful of something. The area should be somewhere that is quiet and more removed from the rest of the home and should be a very comfortable place, such as a bed, pillow, crate (if they like their crate), etc. You can feed them their meals and give them toys that they get to play with exclusively when they are in their safe haven. When introducing them to the new safe haven space, give them lots of treats and feed them incrementally to help build a positive association with the space. This will be very similar to crate training.

This should also be an area that is now exclusively your dog's own space. No one in the home should spend time with the dog in this area as it is meant for them to be able to remove themselves when they are feeling overwhelmed. The safe haven area should also never be used for punishment (such as time-outs). Full protocol for creating a safe haven included on final two pages.

This may seem counterintuitive, having an area for your dog who's afraid to be left alone to be left alone in, but it will help build the skill set they need to feel more comfortable being alone.

4. Enrichment

Be sure to give your dog plenty to do when you're not home or they could become bored, and boredom can become aversive, which could turn into or escalate the fear of being left alone.

Provide puzzle toys that will dispense treats when you're not home or feed your dog's meals out of a puzzle feeder just before you leave, if you have a consistent schedule. Having a variety of puzzle toys will also be beneficial so that your dog doesn't just figure one out, so it is no longer a challenge. You can do an online search for puzzle toys to buy, or a DIY list of toys as well, so you can save some money and see what kind of toy and what difficulty level works best for your dog. There may be some trial and error with finding what toys work best, as if a toy is too easy, then there's not much of a challenge, but if a toy is too hard then it may cause your dog to give up on it.

Frozen enrichment toys such as Kongs or other hard rubber treat dispensing toys also make for good activities for your dog to do on his own. Try stuffing and then freezing them with peanut butter, unsweetened yogurt, wet food, etc. Snuffle mats are also really good food toys, especially for dogs who like to sniff and use their noses. Make sure that you are taking into account the extra calories your pets is eating using these methods.

Before and while you start working on modifying the behavior, you need to make sure that your dog is supported, which means that they cannot be left alone for longer than they can handle. This means that if your dog cannot handle being alone for more than 2 seconds at a time then you cannot leave your dog alone for more than 2 seconds at a time, no matter what. This may mean you need to work from home, get creative with arranging and off-setting your schedule with someone else who also lives in the home, hiring a dog sitter, etc.

Modifying the Behavior

As stated previously, SA is a phobia, and, with hard work, patience, and a good plan, most phobias can actually be overcome.

The most important thing is to keep a vigilant eye on your dog and their body language. As you move through this process, make sure that your dog is calm and relaxed at each step before moving on to the next. If you start to see signs of stress, tension, fear, etc., then stop immediately and move back to the previous step. You may find in some cases that you need to split steps to help create a bridge, as going from one step to the next is too far of a leap. A body language infographic can be found at the end of this document to help give you an idea on various body postures and what they mean.

Tips:

- Training sessions should be once a day at 30 minutes each, and done at least 5 days a week. Giving your dog a one- or two-day break throughout the week can be beneficial as it gives them some extra time to relax and takes some pressure off.
- Give your dog 30- to 60-second breaks between each repetition and/or between moving on to the next step
- Set your dog up for maximum success by taking them out for a walk, out to the yard to eliminate, or by feeding them if it's close to meal time before starting your session

- When starting a new session, drop back a step or two from where you had previously left off serving as a type of “review” to get your dog warmed up and eased back in. Think of it as the “previously on...” opening montage of a TV series episode
- Keep a journal or scorecard to take notes after each session. This will be extremely helpful for you to have so you can look back and remind yourself of which step you were on, mark trends in improvement or decline, etc. You can also write notes to your future self on what to do or for any changes to make for the next session. Also, be sure to note if there are any extenuating circumstances that may be going on during that particular session such as rain/storms, construction, neighbor noise or any other unusual or excessive noises, if your dog isn’t feeling well, etc.

The following is the training plan to follow for your dog if it has been determined that they do have SA. Remember to take the protocol as a whole very slowly and not to move on to the next step until your dog is calm, quiet, and relaxed at the current step. There is no such thing as moving too slow in this process.

Series 1

This is the first series of exercises in the training plan. We're starting very simple and then gradually moving our way up. You will also notice that some steps are repeated throughout the course of the series. This is intentional. As you progress, be sure to keep an eye on your dog to see if they're showing signs of stress. If they are, then drop back to the previous step. If they are still showing signs of stress after dropping back, then you may need to take a break or end the session early. Repeat the current step 5 times each, until your dog shows calm and relaxed behavior during all 5 repetitions.

1. Walk to the door but do not touch it.
2. Walk to the door and turn the doorknob, not opening the door.
3. Open the door 1 inch.
4. Walk to the door but do not touch it.
5. Open the door 6 inches.
6. Open the door halfway.
7. Walk to the door and turn the door knob, not opening the door.
8. Open the door fully.
9. Open the door fully and take 1 step out.

Series 2

1. Pick up your keys, walk to the door but do not touch it.
2. Pick up your keys, walk to the door and turn the door knob, not opening the door.
3. Pick up your keys, open door 1 inch.
4. Pick up your keys, walk to the door but do not touch it.
5. Pick up your keys, open the door 6 inches.
6. Pick up your keys, open the door halfway.
7. Pick up your keys, walk to the door and turn the door knob, not opening the door.
8. Pick up your keys, open the door fully.
9. Pick up your keys, open the door fully and take 1 step out.

Series 3

1. Put on your shoes, pick up your keys, walk to the door but do not touch it.
2. Put on your shoes, pick up your keys walk to the door and turn the door knob, not opening the door.
3. Put on your shoes, pick up your keys and open the door 1 inch.
4. Put on your shoes, pick up your keys and walk to the door but do not touch it.
5. Put on your shoes, pick up your keys and open door 6 inches.
6. Put on your shoes, pick up your keys and open door halfway.
7. Put on your shoes, pick up your keys, walk to the door and turn the door knob, not opening the door.
8. Put on your shoes, pick up your keys and open the door fully.
9. Put on your shoes, pick up your keys, open the door fully and take 1 step out.

If you have any other items that you commonly grab before leaving (jacket, purse, hat, gloves, etc.), then you may need to incorporate each item into their own additional series. Each series from here on assumes that you have all your items needed on your person as you perform each step.

Series 4

1. Walk to the door but do not open it.
2. Exit your home, closing door behind you.
3. Open the door fully and take 1 step out.
4. Exit home, closing and locking the door behind you.
5. Exit home, closing but not locking the door.
6. Walk to the door, opening it fully and then closing it.
7. Exit the home, closing and locking door behind you, and walk 1 step away.
8. Exit the home, closing and locking door behind you, and walk 3 steps away.

You may find that you need to add some additional increments here by adding a few steps at a time until you reach your car. Things may also vary depending on your home set up, if you live in an apartment, have garage or park in the driveway, street parking, etc. In this final series below, modify it to what fits into your set-up and living situation. If you park your car anywhere the dog can hear, such as a garage, driveway, street parking in front of the house, etc. then follow the steps for turning your car on and off below. If you do not live in a place that your dog can hear you turn your car on and off (parking garage, street parking away from the house, etc.) or if you do not have a car, then disregard the instructions of turning your car on and off and instead simply wait that extra time before returning. If you park in a garage attached to your home, then you may also need to incorporate opening and closing the garage door to this series.

Series 5

1. Exit home, close and lock the door, walk to the car and return.
2. Exit home, close and lock the door, turn the car on for 30 seconds, turn the car off and return.
3. Exit home, close the door but to not lock it.
4. Exit home, close and lock the door, pull the car out of driveway, then back into the driveway and return.
5. Exit home, close and lock the door, turn the car on and then return while the car is still running.
6. Exit home, close and lock the door, turn the car on and drive away, then return in 10 minutes.

To complete this series, continue to modify and extend the amount of time that you leave for before returning.

When Phobias Become Fortitude

You and your dog have put in the work and they are no longer afraid of being alone. Congrats! But...now what? After you're dog's training is "complete," you will still need to uphold the management you initially put into place under the "Getting Started" section of this protocol: keep offering enrichment, keep as much of a structure and routine as possible, keep their safe haven intact, and do not stop the anti-anxiety medication.

Safe Haven

A safe haven is an important place for your dog to have within the home. This can be a place to help fearful dogs feel more comfortable, give reactive dogs a temporary place to be removed from triggers, or just a place that your dog can go to during the day when they feel like being alone.

Creating a Safe Haven

Create an area for your dog to go to that enables them to be able to remove themselves and be alone. The area should be somewhere that is quiet and more removed from the rest of the home and should be a very comfortable place such as a bed, pillow, crate (if they like their crate), etc. You can feed their meals in this space and give toys that they get to play with exclusively when they are in their safe haven. When introducing them to the new safe haven space, give them lots of treats and feed them incrementally to help build a positive association with the space.

For Fearful Dogs

Many fearful dogs will benefit from having a safe haven that gives them space to remove themselves if/when they feel overwhelmed. This could be during a thunderstorm, when there are new and unfamiliar people over, if there's a lot of activity in the home, or any time that the dog is feeling stressed. Make this space comfortable and acclimate your dog using the steps above. Once they have acclimated to this space, keep access to it open for them at all times, and you may find that they will start going to it on their own when they need it.

For Reactive Dogs

Creating a safe haven can also be a key part of a reactive dog's management within the home. If your dog is reactive to certain stimuli, it can sometimes be impossible or impractical to avoid their triggers, including novel people coming to the home, children, people at the door, etc. If/When these triggers occur, lead your dog to their safe haven; ideally, you can do this before they begin reacting, such as setting your dog up in their safe haven before your guests come over. Once there, give them either their meal or treats through a puzzle toy, or give them a long lasting chew or toys that they will play with by themselves. They should be able to keep themselves entertained and busy the entire time they're in the safe haven, unless they fall asleep.

Space Guarding

If your dog guards space on the couch, chairs, bed, or other furniture, then creating a safe haven in the same room near you may be beneficial. If/When your dog climbs up on the furniture, lure them off and then to the safe haven with high-value treats. In this instance, you don't need to worry about the area being quiet and removed, but it should still be very comfortable and enticing, as your dog should want to and enjoy going there, providing them a better alternative than jumping on the furniture. This area should also only be for your dog and them alone.

DOGGIE LANGUAGE

starring Boogie the Boston Terrier



ALERT



SUSPICIOUS



ANXIOUS



THREATENED



ANGRY



"PEACE!"
look away/head turn



STRESSED
yawn



STRESSED
nose lick



"PEACE!"
sniff ground



"RESPECT!"
turn & walk away



"NEED SPACE"
whale eye



STALKING



STRESSED
scratching



STRESS RELEASE
shake off



RELAXED
soft ears, blinky eyes



"RESPECT!"
offer his back



FRIENDLY & POLITE
curved body



FRIENDLY



"PRETTY PLEASE"
round puppy face



"I'M YOUR LOVEBUG"
belly-rub pose



"HELLO I LOVE YOU!"
greeting stretch



"I'M FRIENDLY!"
play bow



"READY!"
prey bow



"YOU WILL FEED ME"



CURIOUS
head tilt



HAPPY
(or hot)



OVERJOYED
wiggly



"MMMM..."



"I LOVE YOU,
DON'T STOP"