

Expect the Pawsible  
positive dog training



# separation anxiety

# SEPARATION ANXIETY

So working with a dog who has separation anxiety takes a lot of patience, as well as a lot of time. Let's begin by talking about how to get your dog used to being alone.

Alright, dogs are social animals, and they form strong attachments to other dogs and people. Problems arise when a dependent dog has a strong attachment to one person in particular, which many people refer to as a velcro dog. Usually, their owners are people who spend a lot of time with their dog, with it being common practice for their dog to follow them from room to room around the house. People who work from home will often see this in their dogs. Sometimes, separation anxiety can also kick in after a stressful period, such as if the owner's work schedule has changed, or a new baby has entered the family. The anxiety can become even more pronounced after a move to a new home.

So, signs of separation anxiety are only seen in the owner's absence, or when a dog is kept from being close to their owner day or night. The dog then experiences a high state of anxiety, and feels the need to do something in order to reduce the stress and built-up tension. This could manifest in a variety of undesirable behaviors, such as chewing, digging, pacing, panting, escaping, lethargy, urination, defecation, scratching at the door and destroying objects. All of these things are merely a dog's way of trying to calm themselves down in your absence. Many people often make the mistake of thinking that their dog is trying to "get back at them" for leaving, but you should never punish a dog for destructive behaviors done in your absence. This will only make matters so much worse by adding to the dog's already-overwhelming anxiety.

Ok, despite the fact that separation anxiety is a serious behavioral issue, there are actually many things that you can do to help your dog, and therefore significantly reduce the anxiety that they feel each time you leave.

To begin with, dogs with separation anxiety usually require significant amounts of fast-paced aerobic activity, as this will help them to relax when you're gone. Two or three 20 to 30 minute exercise sessions are best. Take your dog for a fast walk on a leash, or engage your dog in a fast-paced game of fetch. Even if your dog has a large yard to run in, there is no guarantee that they're actually getting enough activity. Usually, when left to their own devices, most dogs don't spend this time doing regular sustained aerobic activity. They tend to need another dog, or a human, for this to happen.

Now, how you act is always a model for your dog's behavior. Make sure that you don't say goodbye, give your dog a treat, or make a big fuss over your dog when you leave. This will only reinforce the idea that you leaving is a big deal, making them think that this is something to be concerned about. If you act like it's a big deal, then your dog is going to think it's one.

Right, to start the desensitization process, we're going to break down the process of you leaving into smaller parts. This will help to desensitize your dog at a tolerable rate.

So, for the first week, refrain from giving your dog a lot of free attention. Implement the program of "nothing in life is free", meaning that your dog should always need to do something to gain your attention. This could be a "sit", a "down", a "watch", or even a trick - just start asking your dog to do something whenever you give them attention, treats, a meal, or before you start a game of fetch. This will help to reinforce your leadership role, along with the idea that they're not actually equal to you. Your calm and consistent leadership will teach your dog to trust you, and this trust will really help to build self confidence in your dog.

# SEPARATION ANXIETY

Ideally, you should be obedience training for five to ten minutes, twice a day. Positive training can be very beneficial as it'll also help to build self confidence in your dog. Practice lots of brief "sit-stays" and "down-stays".

Then, work on gradually increasing the distance between you and your dog. Your goal is to teach your dog that they can remain calmly and happily in one place while you're physically separated from each other, but not in different rooms.

For example, if you're watching TV with your dog down by your side, you can tell them to "sit-stay" or "down-stay", offer treats or a chew, and then briefly, for about 15 seconds to begin with, move around the room. When you return, release them with the word "okay", but don't offer them any treats or make a big fuss over them.

Now, if your dog hasn't mastered the "stay" command yet, you can still create some distance between you and your dog by using a baby-gate, a crate or simply by putting your dog on a tie-down for a brief time, several times per day. During these times, you should never leave the room completely - your dog should still always be able to see you. The intention isn't to leave your dog alone just yet - it's to create some physical space between the two of you. Even if your dog starts whining or barking, don't look at them. Give them a wonderful chewy or a frozen peanut butter-filled Kong or cream cheese-filled twist 'n' treat just before you walk away. Make sure that you stay within view - don't go out of view unless it's only momentarily. You'll need to practice this multiple times per day for around 15 to 20 seconds each time. Slowly, over time, build this up to 30 seconds, and then to several minutes. Be careful not to rush this process - it's important that you return to your dog long before they start to lose interest in their chew or toy. Each time they lose interest and begin to look for you, the panic sequence begins. It's best to err on the side of caution and return back well before you think you need to. When you return to your dog, the first thing that you should do is pick the item up, before

releasing them from their crate, tie-down, or baby-gated area. Be very careful not to make a fuss over your dog when you come back to release them.

It's really important that you always keep arrivals and departures low-key. Everyone, especially the person most attached to the dog, should ignore the dog for two to three minutes before leaving, or upon returning home. Ignoring means not looking at, not talking to, and not touching your dog. This will help to lower your dog's excitement level before you leave and after you return, which then helps to reduce the amount of stress that they feel when you're gone. Once your dog is finally calm, you can then go ahead and greet them. All greetings need to be low and slow - crouch down, turn to the side, and pet your dog on the chest or under the chin, remembering to not greet your dog if they're in a highly excitable state.

You can also turn on the radio or TV when you aren't at home - animal related channels work quite well! I would also suggest trying one or more natural remedies to help alleviate your dog's anxiety. In a handout accompanying today's class, I've provided the names of some audio visual resources and natural remedies that might help you.

Now, let's talk about a behavioral modification program that has been specifically designed to address severe separation anxiety, as well as any accompanying stress-related behaviors in dogs.

For some dogs, being alone for even a few seconds is completely terrifying. You're going to need to help your dog learn how to be comfortable alone by taking small, incremental steps over a period of several weeks. It's absolutely critical that you go slowly with this, and be patient throughout the entire process.

# SEPARATION ANXIETY

This means that during the training process, you'll need to be very careful not to leave your dog alone for a longer period of time than what they find comfortable. For example, if your dog can only be alone for about a minute before whining or crying, then you'll need to be careful not to leave your dog alone for longer than 45 seconds. Each time your dog is left alone for longer than they are comfortable with, you run the risk of setbacks. If possible, try to find a way to take your dog with you to work. If you can't, then leave your dog with a friend during the day, or take them to doggy daycare.

Ok, when beginning this training, it's always best to begin the process on a Friday, just before the weekend. This gives you just about enough time to make some progress before Monday. Just before starting this exercise, spray the dog appeasing pheromone that I've mentioned in the Resources section for today's class on your dog's bandana, and also on their bed. You could also give your dog other calming remedies about 25 minutes prior to starting this exercise if you think that it'll help.

Also, some dogs will also benefit from having an unwashed article of your clothing next to them. A worn shirt, or even a pillow case, works well.

So, begin the process by placing your dog in a spot that they have not been left in before, such as a crate, pen or gated area. This will be their new "safe" zone.

1. Next, give them a food-stuffed Kong - peanut butter, cream cheese or other gooey foods are best. It is often best to prepare Kongs the prior night and freeze them overnight, as they tend to last longer this way.

2. Then, very briefly go out of sight for just a few seconds, while you keep talking to your dog.

3. Finally, come back inside, quickly grab up the Kong, and then release your dog from confinement.

Ideally, you should be practicing this exercise at least five to ten times per day.

You can also create a tape recording of your voice reading something out loud. Once in a while, pause for several seconds to a minute, so that no sound is recorded.

Then, practice the previous exercise as before, but this time, when you give them their chewy or Kong toy, play your recording too. When your dog is calmly chewing, sneak out of the room for 10 seconds, and then quickly return. Then, switch off the recorder and calmly enter your dog's area. Pick up the chewy or Kong and ignore your dog until they are relaxed. Next, work on gradually increasing the time period to three to four minutes.

Remember, this may take a couple of weeks. If, at any time, you notice signs of anxiety, cut the time you stay away in half. Then, wait until your dog is no longer anxious before you start increasing the time again.

Alright, another training exercise that you can do is to desensitize your dog to the triggers that lead to your dog's anxiety.

So, make a list of the things you do before you leave for the day, such as picking up your keys, putting on your coat, turning on the radio for your dog, and so on.

Then, ten times a day, do all of the things you usually do before you leave for the day, but without actually leaving. So, again, to summarize the steps:

1. Begin by engaging in your normal departure activities, such as getting your keys and putting on your coat.

2. Now, sit back down.

3. Then, go to the door and open it, then sit back down.

# SEPARATION ANXIETY

4. At this point, give your dog their chewy or Kong, and play your recording.
5. Now, when your dog is calmly chewing, sneak out of the room, grab your keys, purse and anything else you take with you when you go out, and exit your home for just a second.
6. Next, return to the room.
7. Then, turn off the recording.
8. Next, pick up the toy.
9. Finally, wait for calm behavior before greeting.

You'll need to proceed with each step very gradually, repeating each one until your dog doesn't show any signs of distress. This means that this could take many repetitions. Slowly get your dog accustomed to being alone with the door closed between you for several seconds. If, at any time, your actions produce an anxiety response, then this means that you've proceeded too far. Return to an earlier step in the process and keep practicing this until there are no more signs of distress.

Then, once your dog is able to tolerate you being on the other side of the door for several seconds, you can begin working on short duration absences. Scatter practice departures and short-duration absences throughout the day as much as you can. Once your dog can handle short absences of around 30 minutes, they'll be far more likely to be able to handle longer intervals alone. Practice and patience are both essential, so go slowly and take your time.

Great! That just about wraps up everything we're going to cover in this class. Thank you for joining us and I'll talk to you later!