

Separation Distress

Why does my dog get so upset when I leave him home alone?

Separation Distress may have both genetic and environmental causes. Dogs are social creatures who depend on each other for survival; to be separate from a family group is to risk death. Additionally, there is a time during a dog's development when he usually learns how to tolerate separations, first by his mom, then by his human adopters. If this learning experience fails and the dog does not learn to handle being left alone, his instinct to stay with his family can cause overwhelming distress and anxiety. Other things that might contribute to Separation Distress are:



- Changes in the household such as a new person or animal, a death or absence, a move etc.
- Changes in the dog's situation such as spending all day with their owner to suddenly being left alone for hours at a time.
- A traumatic event or sudden dramatic change in routine.

How do I know if my dog has Separation Distress?

Because it is something your dog does when he is alone, it can be hard to tell unless you arrive home to a destroyed house. Some of the less obvious signs include:

- Whining, panting and restlessness as you get ready to leave
- Scratched door or window frames, or evidence of pacing.
- Personal items such as clothing destroyed or moved around the house,
- Reports of barking or howling from the neighbors.
- Uneaten food or treats (when the dog is usually always hungry)
- Over-the-top excited greetings when you arrive home.
- Wet front paws (from drool) or spots on the dog's body where he has been licking.
- Following from room to room, always needing to be near you (even in the bathroom).

Some of these signs can be caused by other things, so no one thing is a sure sign your dog has separation distress, however a pattern of these things may be cause for concern.

It is important to know that your dog isn't doing these things to purposefully "get back at you" for leaving him alone. He does it because he is panicking and trying to manage the emotions he is feeling.

Separation Distress is a serious behavioral problem that is very slow and challenging to resolve. Most cases require the assistance of a qualified behavior professional and seeking additional help is strongly recommended.

Tips for Managing Separation Distress

How to do it.

Tip 1. Avoid leaving your dog home alone for extended periods of time. The more he is left alone, the more he will panic and the harder it will be to change the behavior. Consider taking your dog to daycare or having him stay with a neighbor or family member you trust when you need time away from him.

Tip 2. Make sure your dog's mental and physical energy needs are met. Anxiety issues are more intense when your dog doesn't get enough exercise or gets bored. See our handout, "18 Enrichment Ideas."

Tip 3. Don't make a big deal when you leave or return home. If your dog thinks it is a big deal he will become more anxious about it.

Tip 4. Look at your routine for leaving. Your dog knows that pattern and will often start to become anxious before you step out the door. To make your routine less of a predictor of you leaving, practice doing things that you might do as part of that routine during the day when you aren't leaving.

Tip 5. When you leave, give him a comfort item. This can be a worn shirt, a special toy, or something else that smells like you. Keep in mind he may destroy it.

Tip 6. Stop your dog from following you everywhere. The constant need to be near you tends to feed his anxiety, so practice going into separate rooms during the day, have him sleep in his crate or own bed at night, and for heaven's sake, stop letting him take showers with you!

Tip 7. Implement a "Nothing In Life Is For Free" program (see handout). By setting rules and expectations for the dog, it helps to reduce anxiety caused by uncertainty and creates consistency and structure.

Tip 8. Don't punish your dog for the things he does when he is left alone. Because his actions are the result of strong anxiety, yelling, smacking, or otherwise punishing your dog won't make him stop and might even make the situation worse.

Tip 9. Review our handout on "Anxiety Aids" to decide if they are worth investigating to help your dog be calmer.

Tip 10. Train your dog to be left alone. See accompanying handout.

Troubleshooting:

Should I get another dog to keep him company?

Adopting a 2nd dog to keep your anxious dog company is a controversial idea even among trainers. If your dog is anxious because he is bonded to you exclusively or doesn't really like other dogs, another dog will not benefit you. If your dog just doesn't want to be alone, having another dog around might help, or 2 heads might get into more mischief than one! Also, is "stopping your dog from destroying your stuff" really a good reason for taking on the responsibility of another life into your home? At the very least, consider inviting a friend's dog over for playdates before adopting another.

Can't I just put him in a crate when I leave?

Most dogs actually get more anxious when you leave them in a crate because not only are they alone, but they are alone and trapped! Often Anxious dogs left in crates attempt to escape and can seriously hurt themselves in their efforts. Some crate training can be done as part of a treatment program, but generally to encourage the dog to go there for security or to sleep, not to confine.

****The information presented here is for supportive and informative purposes only; it is not intended to diagnose treat or cure any behavioral issue and is not a substitute for professional help. With any behavior problem that persists or worsens, please seek help from a qualified behavior professional.***