

Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety in dogs is more than just whimpering when you leave the house, or moving your slipper onto his bed. True separation anxiety is similar to a panic attack and can range in intensity, depending on the dog and the amount of time he is left alone.

It's important to remember that any destruction or going potty in the house that happens with separation anxiety is not your dog's way to punish you for leaving.

Signs of separation anxiety

Your dog may have separation anxiety if he shows any of these behaviors when left alone:

- Excessive drooling or heavy panting
- Repeated attempts to escape
- Digging, chewing, or scratching at doors and windows
- Barking and/or whining for a long time
- Peeing or pooping
- Destroying items like baseboards, furniture, or door frames

Is it definitely separation anxiety?

Most dogs don't actually suffer from true separation anxiety - they are just bored!

Sometimes a dog who barks, whines, destroys things, and goes potty in the house may not be experiencing separation anxiety. Instead, these dogs could be just bored or needing training. It's important to rule this out as a cause before separation anxiety.

If your dog is bored, you need to make sure that his physical and mental needs are being met. This might mean giving your dog some extra exercise like a long walk before crate time, or giving your dog a puzzle toy when you are gone to provide some extra mental stimulation.

If your dog is peeing or pooping in the house, this might be a potty training issue or a medical concern. Again, it's important to rule this out before diagnosing separation anxiety.

Things that WON'T help your dog's separation anxiety

- **Punishment:** Punishing your dog for destroying things or going potty in the house will not fix separation anxiety. In fact, punishing your dog after you return home may actually increase their separation anxiety.
- **Getting another pet to be his friend:** While there are some examples of this helping, getting another dog does not typically help if the anxiety is the result of separation from **you**, not merely being alone.
- **Forcing your dog in a crate without training:** If your dog is not taught that the crate is a safe space, they will still have an anxious response and could potentially injure themselves trying to escape the crate.
- **Only obedience training:** While formal obedience training is always a good idea and could provide great mental and physical stimulation, it is unlikely that it will solely help a separation anxiety problem. Separation anxiety is not the result of not obeying you or lack of training, it is truly a panic response.



What to do if your dog has separation anxiety

1. Provide your dog with more exercise. This can help or even get rid of symptoms of boredom, and it helps release as much pent up energy as possible. Exercise your dog's mind AND body: Give your dog both physical and mental exercise. Teach your dog to play hide-and seek with his toys, teach him tricks, get him involved in a sport like flyball or agility, or let him play with other dogs. Not only do these things increase confidence and independence, they are mentally tiring and therefore increases the chance your dog will rest quietly when left alone. A tired dog is a good dog!

2. Feed your dog's meal when you are getting ready to leave your home. We also recommend giving his meals through interactive or puzzle toys, which makes your dog work for his food. This keeps him engaged for longer and provides mental stimulation while you're gone.

3. Keep arrivals and departures low key. Don't make it a big deal when you leave or come home. For example, when you first walk in the house ignore your dog for the first few minutes and then calmly pet him.

4. Practice a routine to start desensitizing your dog. You may not even realize it, but the things you do before you leave like picking up your keys or putting on your shoes could be a cue to your dog that you're about to leave, causing anxiety to build before you even leave. The goal of the below exercise is to make your leaving routine less predictable and anxiety-producing to your dog.

Start your normal activities that signal you're getting ready to leave: getting your keys, putting on your coat, etc. Then sit down and relax (almost like you just changed your mind). It's possible that your dog has started to show signs of anxiety already. Ignore your dog completely during this and wait until they start showing signs that they are calm. Once they are in a more relaxed state, repeat this step. Continue until your dog shows no sign of distress in response to your actions. This exercise works best if practiced randomly, multiple times a day.

5. Teach your dog how to be comfortable in the crate. If your dog has not had any crate training, or is showing discomfort in the crate, please see our crate training document.

6. Work on building a positive association when you leave. This skill should not be worked on until your dog has built up a positive association with the crate. Once your dog has been desensitized to your leaving routine, and is showing no issue being inside the crate while you are home, you can begin working on conditioning a positive response to you leaving your dog alone. Proceed slowly from step to step, repeating each one until your dog shows no signs of distress. The number of times you need to repeat each step will vary depending on the severity of the anxiety. If at any time in this process your actions produce an anxiety response in your dog, you've moved on too fast. Return to an earlier step in the process and practice it until the dog shows no distress, then move to the next step.

- Do your normal activities that signal you're getting ready to leave (from the previous step), then go to the door. Open it then close it and then calmly go to your dog and reward him with a high value treat (something he loves and doesn't get very often). Repeat this step until your dog is showing relaxed body language and behavior.
- Next, continue the steps as above and step outside of the door for just a moment with the door open, and then step back inside and shut the door. Calmly walk back over to your dog and reward him with a high value treat. Repeat this step until the dog is showing relaxed body language and behavior.
- Now step outside, close the door behind you, and then immediately come back inside. Calmly walk back over to your dog and reward them with a high value treat. Repeat until the dog is showing relaxed body language and behavior.
- Once your dog is fine with you being on the other side of the door for several seconds, begin working on short durations of time. This step includes giving the dog a verbal cue (for example, "I'll be back"), leaving, and then returning within a minute. Keep your return low key; either ignore your dog or greet him quietly and calmly. Repeat the exercise and gradually increase the length of time you are gone.
- Practice as many absences as possible that last less than 10 minutes. You can "leave" many times during one session if your dog is relaxed enough between departures. You should also practice leaving and short-duration absences throughout the day.

In the meantime...

The training plan listed above can take some time, and because a dog with separation anxiety can do some serious damage to themselves or your home, consider these suggestions to help you and your dog in the short term:

- **Consult a vet.** Talk to your veterinarian about the possibility of medication. Medication DOES NOT replace training. Instead, it should be used to lower your dog's anxiety enough that the training will have a better opportunity of sticking. The medication shouldn't sedate your dog, but simply lower his anxiety while you're gone.
- **Hire a dog walker**, or take your dog to doggie day care while you're gone.
- **Leave your dog with a friend, family member, or neighbor.**
- **Take your dog to work with you**, even for a half day.

Separation anxiety can be a difficult behavior to change, and we recommend getting help from a qualified behavior professional if your dog's anxiety is on the moderate to severe end. Please reach out to the Austin Animal Center Behavior Team at animal.Behavior@austintexas.org for more information on finding a trainer.