



Does your dog get upset when you leave them alone at home? Do they howl, bark, soil, or destroy items in your house? If so, your dog may have separation anxiety. Here are some recommendations to assist your dog with separation anxiety.

What is Separation Anxiety?

Dogs suffering from separation anxiety enter into a panicked state when they are left alone. They will often display distress behaviours when their guardian leaves, which can include vocalizations (i.e. barking, howling), urination and defecation, destructive behaviours, attempts to escape (i.e. scratching at windows or doors), pacing, and drooling.

It is important to humanely address separation anxiety, to prevent associated injuries, such as broken teeth or nails (from escape attempts), and to alleviate your dog's mental distress.

What Causes Separation Anxiety?

The cause of separation anxiety can be multifactorial and difficult to elucidate. It is important to understand that separation anxiety symptoms are NOT a dog's attempt to punish their guardian for their loneliness. These behaviours are coping mechanisms and reflect the dog's distress. Remember, dogs are highly social animals and typically do not cope well with prolonged isolation.

Potential Causes:

- When a dog accustomed to human companionship is left alone for the first time.
- Following a period in which a dog and their guardian are constantly together, such as a vacation.
- After a traumatic event (from a dog's point of view) such as time spent at a veterinary clinic or boarding kennel.
- After a change in the family's routine or structure, such as a change in work schedule or relocation to a new residence.

Common Behavioural Symptoms

It is important to differentiate separation anxiety from other behavioural or medical issues that might present with similar symptoms. An important factor is timing. When do the problem behaviours occur?

With regards to separation anxiety, they will occur as the guardian prepares to leave the residence, or once they have left. For example, if your dog is soiling when you are home, the issue might be related to an underlying medical problem instead of separation anxiety.

If most, or all, of the following statements are true about your dog, they may have a separation anxiety problem:

- The behavior(s) occurs exclusively or primarily when your dog is left alone.
- Your dog refuses to eat when you are not home, even if given high-value treats.
- Your dog show signs of anxiety when you being to depart the home.
- Your dog has injuries related to escape attempts (i.e. broken teeth or nails).

Addressing Separation Anxiety

Mild cases of separation anxiety may be resolved with the following tips. For more severe cases, these changes should be used in conjunction with a desensitization program facilitated by a certified dog trainer:

- Keep arrivals and departures quickly and avoid encouraging excitement. Upon returning home, ignore excitable behaviours (jumping, barking) and reward calm behaviours. This can be difficult, but it's important to teach your dog that leaving and returning is not something to get overly excited about.
- Provide your dog with enrichment when you depart the home. For example, try filling a KONG® toy with nut butter and/or dog treats. Freezing the toy will increase the longevity of the enrichment. Over time, your dog will associate you leaving the house with a positive occurrence.
- Use a camera or video device to monitor your dog's behaviour after your departure and while you are away from home. A bit of intermittent barking is normal, but constant or significant anxiety behaviours should be addressed with the support of a certified dog trainer.

For more severe cases of separation anxiety, you will need to slowly train your dog to be independent. This should be performed under the consultation of a certified dog trainer. The goal of this procedure is to diminish your dog's stress behaviours and change their perception of your departure, using positive reinforcement.

Training Sit-Stay or Down-Stay Commands

A great supplemental exercise is to teach your dog to sit or lay-down and stay. You should be able to give a "sit" or "down" cue and walk away from your dog (even out of sight) and return to them remaining in position. This needs to be trained step-by-step.

- Give your dog a "sit" or "down" cue. Reward your dog with a treat. Take a step away from your dog. If your dog does not move from their position, reward your dog. If your dog moves out of

their position, go back to rewarding your dog for remaining sitting or lying down for several seconds without you moving away from them.

- Repeat the above steps and increase the number of steps you move away from your dog. If your dog attempts to follow you or moves away, go back to taking just a single step away. Gradually increase the distance away from your dog.

Try moving away in different directions or walking a circle around your dog. Eventually, you should be able to leave your dog's range of sight and return to them waiting in a sit or down position. This is a great exercise to practice without having to leave your house!

You can also try using a dog appeasing pheromone product, such as Adaptil® which can help reduce anxiety in some dogs.

Did You Know?

Adaptil® products are available for purchase at Bingo's Pet Shop at the Edmonton Humane Society! All sales proceeds go directly back to the Edmonton Humane Society to help the animals in our care!

What to AVOID

Here are some things to avoid when addressing separation anxiety:

- Punishing your dog. This will often have an adverse effect and it does not address the underlying cause of the anxiety. It suppresses the unwanted behaviour temporarily, but it does not teach the dog what alternative behaviours are appropriate.
- Getting another pet as a companion for your dog. This usually doesn't help a dog suffering from separation anxiety, as typically the source of anxiety is related to you leaving the home.
- Crating your dog. Over time, your dog can be trained to enjoy their crate when you leave the home. However, in the meantime, your dog will still have anxiety responses in the crate and may urinate, defecate, or even injure themselves while attempting to escape.

Consulting a Veterinarian

In severe cases of separation anxiety, or if your dog does not respond to behaviour modification, you may wish to consult with your veterinarian. They can prescribe medications that can assist with your dog's anxiety, in conjunction with continued training. Your veterinarian can also help identify if your dog's behaviour is related to separation anxiety or another condition.

Interim Solutions

Since separation anxiety can be associated with injury, property damage, or bylaw issues (i.e. noise complaints) consider these options to help your dog cope in the short term.

- Take your dog to a reputable dog daycare facility or boarding kennel.
- Leave your dog in the care of a friend, family member, or qualified pet sitter.
- Take your dog to work with you, if your workplace has a pet-friendly policy.
- Exercise your dog, especially in the morning before you leave home or hire a dog walker during the day.

Additional Resources:

The Training Academy at the Edmonton Humane Society offers private consultations for behavioural issues such as separation anxiety. For more information, visit our website:

<https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/what-we-do/education-training/dog-training/private-consultations/>

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behaviour questions by emailing:

askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).