

Preventing Separation Anxiety in Dogs

Now that many of us are sheltering in place or working from home, our dogs are at risk for developing separation anxiety when our schedules return to normal. Dogs are highly social creatures and after enjoying having the family around all the time, some are going to have a hard time adjusting to being alone when schools and businesses reopen. Dogs suffering from separation anxiety might urinate, defecate, bark, howl, chew, dig or try to escape when left alone. Escape attempts by dogs with separation anxiety are often extreme and can result in self-injury and household destruction, especially around exit points like windows and doors.

Some dogs suffering from separation anxiety become agitated when their guardians prepare to leave. They may pace, pant, bark, cry or even attempt to block the person from leaving. Others seem depressed prior to their guardians' departure or when their guardians aren't present. Usually, right after a guardian leaves a dog with separation anxiety, the dog will begin barking and displaying other distress behaviors within a short time after being left alone—often within minutes. When the guardian returns home, the dog acts as though it's been years since he's seen his mom or dad!

To prevent your dog from developing separation anxiety, it's a good idea to maintain a routine schedule even during these unique times. Try to keep your pet's daily routine as intact as possible even while the family is home by scheduling walks and meals around the same time as you did before sheltering-in-place. It's always a good idea to provide plenty of physical exercise before the time you would normally head out for the day. Take your dog for a brisk walk, interspersed with plenty of sniffing opportunities, or engage him in a game of aerobic activity, such as fetching a toy, until he's worked off his excess energy.

Then establish periods of time alone even while you and your family are home:

- Create a comfortable, cozy place for your dog to spend time away from all the activity of remote work and school. This could be a favorite bed or a crate in another room. Close the door or use a baby gate to keep the dog in the room. Play the radio or turn on the TV to keep your dog company and mask the sounds of activities in other part of the house.
- When you leave your dog, say goodbye the same way you would if you were leaving the house. Offer him a tasty chew or a puzzle toy stuffed with food that's likely to keep him busy for 10-20 minutes. There are many safe, interactive puzzle toys available online, as well as all sorts of delicious and easily digestible chews, such as bully sticks, tendons, trachea, scapula and cheek rolls. Chewing and licking serve to soothe dogs and, after a snack, they tend to want to nap.
- At least once a day take a stroll or do some gardening without your dog so that you're practicing actual departures from your home. Before you leave, go through the same routine that you normally do when you leave the house.

These measures should suffice to prevent your dog from becoming anxious about being left alone once you and your family resumes a normal schedule. Be mindful that leaving your dog in another part of the house while you're home is different from leaving your dog home alone. Some dogs will be fine knowing that you're still somewhere in the house but will be anxious being left completely alone. Other dogs will be okay left home alone but will be agitated knowing that you're in the home but they can't get to you. Ideally, these recommendations will get your dog comfortable with both scenarios.

What to Do if Your Dog Becomes Distressed

If your dog barks, cries, whines or scratches at the door during alone time while you are in the house try to wait him out. Most dogs will give up after a few minutes and go to sleep. If he persists or escalates, you may need to do something to distract him (such as knocking on the door and saying "Quiet!") and then, after a few seconds of him being quiet, praise him and let him out. Next time, provide him with more enticing goodies and be sure to let your dog out of their alone space while they are still engaging in their puzzle toy or chew and before they begin vocalizing or scratching at the door. Just a few minutes per day is a good place to start. If your dog is happily engaged in activities or resting, you can allow him to practice being alone for gradually longer stretches of time.

If your dog is only distressed when you're in another part of the house, you may opt not to worry about it and simply maintain a routine of leaving your dog home alone while you leave the house for a short period of time each day.

The important take away is that your dog routinely spends time away from the family while you shelter-in-place and that your dog is not distressed during those periods of alone time.

If you are unsure if your dog is distressed when you leave him alone while you are out of the house you should set up a camera or audio recorder and leave your dog home alone to determine whether he gets distressed when you leave the house. If he's distressed when you leave as well, refer to our handout on Treating Separation Anxiety.

What NOT to Do

Do not scold or punish your dog. Anxious behaviors are not the result of disobedience or spite. They are distress responses! Your dog displays anxious behaviors when left alone because he's upset and trying to cope with a great deal of stress. If you punish him, he may become even more upset and the problem could get much worse.