



Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety has several behaviors in common with lack of training. Here are some hallmarks of separation anxiety.

Urinating and Defecating

Some dogs urinate or defecate when left alone or separated from their guardians. If a dog urinates or defecates in the presence of his guardian, his house soiling probably isn't caused by separation anxiety.

Barking and Howling

A dog who has separation anxiety might bark or howl when left alone or when separated from his guardian. This kind of barking or howling is persistent and doesn't seem to be triggered by anything except being left alone.

Chewing, Digging and Destruction

Some dogs with separation anxiety chew on objects, door frames or window sills, dig at doors and doorways, or destroy household objects when left alone or separated from their guardians. These behaviors can result in self-injury, such as broken teeth, cut and scraped paws and damaged nails. If a dog's chewing, digging and destruction are caused by separation anxiety, they don't usually occur in his guardian's presence.

Escaping

A dog with separation anxiety might try to escape from an area where he's confined when he's left alone or separated from his guardian. The dog might attempt to dig and chew through doors or windows, which could result in self-injury, such as broken teeth, cut and scraped front paws and damaged nails. If the dog's escape behavior is caused by separation anxiety, it doesn't occur when his guardian is present.

Pacing

Some dogs walk or trot along a specific path in a fixed pattern when left alone or separated from their guardians. Some pacing dogs move around in circular patterns, while others walk back and forth in straight lines. If a dog's pacing behavior is caused by separation anxiety, it usually doesn't occur when his guardian is present.

Coprophagia

When left alone or separated from their guardians, some dogs defecate and then consume all or some of their excrement. If a dog eats excrement because of separation anxiety, he probably doesn't perform that behavior in the presence of his guardian.

Other medical and behavioral problems to rule out:

Incontinence Caused by Medical Problems

Some dogs' house soiling is caused by incontinence, a medical condition in which a dog "leaks" or voids his bladder. Dogs with incontinence problems often seem unaware that they've soiled. Sometimes they void urine while asleep. A number of medical issues—including a urinary tract infection, a weak sphincter caused by old age, hormone-related problems after spay surgery, bladder stones, diabetes, kidney disease, Cushing's disease, neurological problems and abnormalities of the genitalia—can cause urinary incontinence in dogs. Before attempting behavior modification for separation anxiety, please see your dog's veterinarian to rule out medical issues.

Submissive or Excitement Urination

Some dogs may urinate during greetings, play, physical contact or when being reprimanded or punished. Such dogs tend to display submissive postures during interactions, such as holding the tail low, flattening the ears back against the head, crouching or rolling over and exposing the belly.

Incomplete House Training

A dog who occasionally urinates in the house might not be completely house trained. His house training might have been inconsistent or it might have involved punishment that made him afraid to eliminate while his owner is watching or nearby.

Urine Marking

Some dogs urinate in the house because they're scent marking. A dog scent marks by urinating small amounts on vertical surfaces. Most male dogs and some female dogs who scent mark raise a leg to urinate.

Juvenile Destruction

Many young dogs engage in destructive chewing or digging while their guardians are home as well as when they're away.

Boredom

Dogs need mental stimulation, and some dogs can be disruptive when left alone because they're bored and looking for something to do. These dogs usually don't appear anxious.

Excessive Barking or Howling

Some dogs bark or howl in response to various triggers in their environments, like unfamiliar sights and sounds. They usually vocalize when their guardians are home as well as when they're away.

If you aren't sure if your dog has separation anxiety or not, you can call or email the behavior hotline at the shelter. behavior@bayareahumanesociety.com or (920)469-3110 ext. 116.

Why Do Some Dogs Develop Separation Anxiety?

There is no conclusive evidence showing exactly why dogs develop separation anxiety. However, because far more dogs who have been adopted from shelters have this behavior problem than those kept by a single family since puppyhood, it is believed that loss of an important person or group of people in a dog's life can lead to separation anxiety. Other less dramatic changes can also trigger the disorder. The following is a list of situations that have been associated with development of separation anxiety.

- **Change of Guardian or Family**-Being abandoned, surrendered to a shelter or given to a new guardian or family can trigger the development of separation anxiety.
- **Change in Schedule**
- **Change in Residence**
- **Change in Household Membership**-The sudden absence of a resident family member, either due to death or moving away, can trigger the development of separation anxiety.

What to Do If Your Dog Has Separation Anxiety

If your dog has mild signs of separation anxiety, follow the suggestions below. If it's severe, please see the Severe Separation Anxiety brochure, available in the lobby at BAHS or on line.

If your dog has a mild case of separation anxiety, counterconditioning might reduce or resolve the problem.

Counterconditioning is a treatment process that changes an animal's fearful, anxious or aggressive reaction to a pleasant, relaxed one instead. It's done by associating the sight or presence of a feared or disliked person, animal, place, object or situation with something really good, something the dog loves. Over time, the dog learns that whatever he fears actually predicts good things for him. For dogs with separation anxiety, counterconditioning focuses on developing an association between being alone and good things, like delicious food. To develop this kind of association, every time you leave the house, you can offer your dog a puzzle toy stuffed with food that will take him at least 20 to 30 minutes to finish. For example, try giving your dog a KONG® stuffed with something really tasty, like cream cheese, Cheez Whiz® or peanut butter, frozen banana and cottage cheese, or canned dog food and kibble. A KONG can even be frozen so that getting all the food out takes even more of your dog's time. Be sure to remove these special toys as soon as you return home so that your dog only has access to them and the high-value foods inside when he's by himself. You can feed your dog all of his daily meals in special toys. For example, you can give your dog a KONG or two stuffed with his breakfast and some tasty treats every morning before going to work. Keep in mind, though, that this approach will only work for mild cases of separation anxiety because highly anxious dogs usually won't eat when their guardians aren't home.

Provide Plenty of "Jobs" for Your Dog to Do

Providing lots of physical and mental stimulation is a vital part of treating many behavior problems, especially those involving anxiety. Exercising your dog's mind and body can greatly enrich his life, decrease stress and provide appropriate outlets for normal dog behaviors. Additionally, a physically and mentally tired dog doesn't have much excess energy to expend when he's left alone.

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.