

# Separation Anxiety - When Your Dog Is Scared You Won't Come Back

I think it's fair to say most pet parents believe their fur babies can't be without them. I see it every time I recommend a pet be hospitalized - "Fluffy can't stay in the hospital without me" or "Lucky won't be able to cope without me being with him." However, most of the time - much to the bewilderment of their families - Fluffy and Lucky are just fine away from their parents. They bond with their medical team members, and settle in comfortably while receiving the care they need. Yet some pets do, indeed, have problems when their parents aren't with them. These pets have separation anxiety that can result in destructive behaviors. This week, I wanted to share some information about this behavioral problem to help dog parents who may be coping with it. Happy reading!



## Separation Anxiety - What is it?

Separation anxiety is the manifestation of inappropriate behaviors due to separation from a major attachment figure (e.g.: pet parent, child) or from home.

Dogs are a social species, and they readily develop attachments to humans. Several factors can influence the development of separation anxiety, including:

- Change in routine / household changes
- Previous experiences (e.g.: traumatic separation in stray/shelter/rescue animals)
- Genetics
- Degree of human attachment
- Gregariousness of the individual animal

## **Separation Anxiety - What does it look like?**

Manifestations of separation anxiety are variable, but can be highly destructive. Affected dogs often become agitated when pet parents are preparing to leave. They may be triggered by the sight of suitcases, sounds of jingling car keys, and the smell of cologne/perfume. Signs manifest when dogs are home alone, but can be observed with the use of home video monitoring equipment. Common manifestations include:

- Vocalization - whining, barking, howling
- Inappropriate elimination - urinating and/or defecating in the home
- Destructive behaviors - scratching, chewing, and/or digging behaviors
- Excessive drooling (ptyalism)
- Self-injury - chewing on and/or pawing at wood and/or kennels can result in dental and/or foot injuries
- Anorexia - refusing to eat when families are away
- Escape attempts
- Aggression - particularly when family members are preparing to leave house
- Disproportionate greetings - dogs don't settle down appropriately when pet parents return home

See the video below for a dog with separation anxiety who whines, barks, and escapes from his kennel.

## Separation Anxiety - How is it diagnosed?

There are no blood, urine, or fecal tests to diagnose separation anxiety. Therefore, it's imperative veterinarians obtain a complete patient history and perform a thorough physical examination for any dog suspected of living with this disorder. They must eliminate from possibility other problems with similar clinical signs, including boredom, house-training problems, noise/thunderstorm phobias, confinement anxiety, and territorial aggression. Although there isn't a definitive diagnostic test for separation anxiety, veterinarians should evaluate blood and urine to ensure patients are not living with biochemical abnormalities that could contribute to a dog's clinical signs. Many medical conditions can make dogs more anxious, and thus could be misinterpreted as anxiety. Perhaps most important for accurately diagnosing separation anxiety is video recording the behavior of pets when they are home alone. These videos can be unquestionably invaluable!

Pet parents may find it beneficial to partner with a board-certified veterinary behavior specialist to ensure an accurate diagnosis is made.

## Separation Anxiety - How is it treated?

The primary goal of managing separation anxiety is to resolve destructive behaviors through consistent home management. This may be achieved through the following:

- Creating a safe and enriching environment - Some techniques include using puzzle toys for feeding, utilizing background noise, and using appropriate items to destroy (e.g.: pizza boxes, stuffed toys). It is very important to use these tools both when family is home and when they're away
- Encouraging independence - Standard good citizenship training empowers dogs with basic social skills and coping mechanisms
- Downplaying departures & arrivals - Pet parents may find it helpful to use techniques like utilizing white noise to block sounds associated with departure, preparing for departure well ahead of time, and having neutral interactions with a pet at least 30 minutes prior to departure
- Promoting relaxation during separation - Pet parents may find it helpful to exercise with their dog before leaving to release energy and increase

the release of endorphins.

Some dogs require drug therapy to help them successfully cope with separation anxiety. The medications are typically selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRI) or tricyclic antidepressants (TCA) that ultimately increase the level of serotonin in the central nervous system. However, many types of drugs are available to help, and combination therapy may be beneficial. Some of the medications commonly used include:

- Clomipramine hydrochloride (Clomicalm®)
- Fluoxetine hydrochloride (Reconcile®, Prozac®, Lovan®)
- Trazadone (Desyrel®)
- Amitriptyline (Elavil®)
- Alprazolam (Xanax®)
- Clonidine (Catapres®)
- Gabapentin (Neurontin®)
- Diazepam (Valium®)
- Dog-Appeasing Pheromone (DAP)
- Melatonin

Dog parents are encouraged to partner with a board-certified veterinary behaviorist to develop the best treatment plan for their fur baby coping with separation anxiety.

## **The take-away message about separation anxiety in dogs...**

Separation anxiety is a common behavioral disorder in dogs. Through appropriate recognition, environmental modifications, consistent training, and various medications, affected dogs can lead high quality lives with their families.

To find a board-certified veterinary behavior specialist, please visit the [American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](#).

Wishing you wet-nosed kisses,

CriticalCareDVM