

Before your dog has her first full blown anxiety episode, it's easy to mistake her panting, pawing greeting when you return from a two minute dash to the mailbox as simply the unconditional love of a dog for her owner.

Another mistake dog owners often make is to assume the destructive activity their dogs engage in during an episode of separation anxiety is misbehavior. The misguided belief is that the bored, grumpy dog is exacting revenge on her owner for being left behind.

Separation Anxiety – What It Is, What It Looks Like

If your dog suffers from true separation anxiety, he's having a panic attack similar to the ones humans have. This is a condition over which he has no control.

Canine separation anxiety characteristically involves at least one and often several of the following behaviors while you're away from home:

Non-stop whining, howling or barking

Physical signs of anxiety such as excessive panting, drooling and pacing

Relieving himself indoors

Destruction of flooring, doors, windows, furniture, and other items inside the house; tearing up plants and shrubs and digging holes in the yard outside the house

Efforts to dig or paw his way out of either his crate or another enclosed space, often resulting in self-injury

Your dog's destructive, out-of-control behavior while he's in the midst of an episode isn't deliberate or "payback" for being left alone – it's coming from the very real terror he's feeling.

Unfortunately, many dog owners are able to see upon returning home to a mess or an angry neighbor complaining the dog has been howling for hours is the problem their pet has created.

If all your dog does while you're away is chew on the occasional sock or slipper, or pull a few pieces of paper from the trash, chances are he's not anxious. He's likely just bored or doing what dogs are designed to do, which is explore the world with their noses and mouths.

It's easy to distinguish a case of separation anxiety from doggie boredom. The behaviors that result from separation anxiety happen only when you're not around and every time you're not around. It's also likely your dog has learned your routine when you're preparing to leave the house and shows signs of anxiety before you go.

If your dog has separation anxiety, it's important to understand the very real fear that grips him and prompts the destructive behavior. Helping your dog overcome the disorder will involve dealing with his anxiety, first – not the behavior it provokes.

Causes of Separation Anxiety

No definitive information exists on why some dogs develop separation anxiety and others don't. Some dogs used to the constant presence of their owner will have an episode the first time they're left alone. Other dogs will develop a problem over time.

Well-loved pups that wind up at a shelter due to the death or illness of an owner can become panicked when they're left alone at home by their new family.

Significant changes in a dog's routine, like a move or the loss of a family member or other pet have also been known to trigger anxiety disorders in some dogs.

How to Help a Dog with Separation Anxiety

If your dog suffers from a relatively mild form of the disorder, there are many ways to reduce her anxiety and increase her tolerance for being alone. Some of these things are simple to do; others will require effort and patience. Some methods work with certain dogs but not others, so be prepared to try different things.

Ignore your dog for a short period before you leave the house and when you return. The idea is to make your comings and goings a non-event by taking no notice of her anxious behavior. Trying to soothe her anxiety with attention has the effect of rewarding the behavior, which only encourages more of it.

Desensitize your pup to all the sights and sounds involved when you're preparing to leave the house. In other words, go through all the motions of leaving without leaving.

Since you probably don't know exactly which cues your dog is reacting to, you'll need to observe her carefully and also make a mental (or written) list of your preparing-to-leave activities. These will include things like turning lights on or off, putting on shoes or a coat, adjusting the thermostat, picking up a briefcase or purse, jingling car keys, walking to the door, opening the door, and so forth.

Start with the first preparing-to-leave activity you normally perform and do it over and over – again, without actually leaving the house -- until your pup no longer takes much notice of that particular action. Then add the next activity. Then the next and so on, until you're able to leave the house for at least an hour and your pup remains calm while you're gone.

Leave your dog with an article of clothing or blanket with your scent on it.

Leave a treat-release toy like the Clever K-9 for your dog to focus on in your absence. Place small treats around the house for her to discover, along with her favorite toys.

Make sure your dog gets plenty of heart pumping exercise, playtime, mental stimulation and TLC. The more full her life is when you're around, the calmer she'll be when you're not.

What If the Problem is Severe?

If your dog's separation anxiety is severe enough that he is very destructive when left alone or you're concerned he might hurt himself, you'll need to confine him for his own safety and to keep your home and belongings intact – at least in the interim while you try the suggestions listed above.

I recommend crating your dog. If he doesn't have a crate, or has one he doesn't like or is fearful of, I recommend training (or re-training) him to use it.

A crate will allow you to work with your pup's natural desire to be a den dweller. Dogs in the wild seek out small, dark, safe spots to inhabit.

Crate size is important. You want a space that is not too small, but not too big. Your dog should be able to stand up, lie down and turn around in his crate.

The first rule of crate training: never force your dog into a crate. You never want to introduce a crate, shove your dog into it, close the door and leave him. That's how you create a raging case

of separation anxiety, not cure one.

At my house, we never pull a dog out of his crate, either. The crate should represent a safe zone for your dog, so you never want to make his safe zone feel unsafe to him by forcing him into it or out of it.

The second rule of crate training: it's all good.

In other words, everything about the crate must be a good thing from your dog's perspective. Treats go in the crate. So do chew toys, raw bones, and other special indulgences.

What I do at home is drape a blanket over the back half of my dogs' crates to create a quiet, dark (den-like) environment. My dogs use their crates as bedrooms – they go into them to sleep.

If your pup has had no bad experiences with a crate and you create a safe, dark little den for him inside, he might just go right in voluntarily as soon as you present his new space to him. If so, that's excellent!

Don't leave him alone in the crate for more than about a half-hour initially, and work up to longer periods of time. It will really help decrease his anxiety if he learns to enjoy his 'bedroom' before you put him in there when the time comes to leave him home alone.

For Separation Anxiety relief contact Natural Healing for animals to discuss this further.