



DOG CARE



What can I do if my dog has separation anxiety?

Dogs are extremely social "pack" animals that prefer to live in groups. Separation anxiety is a common behavioural problem that occurs when the dog is separated from their "pack" which is represented by their owner/s.

Separation anxiety is characterised by signs of distress when the animals are separated from an owner or family to which the animal is highly attached. Behavioural responses may include destructiveness, escaping, house-soiling, excessive barking, digging or pacing, among other signs.

The aim of the following treatment is to teach the dog how to be calm and relaxed during the owner's absence. It involves changes in how you interact with your dog, changes in your leaving and returning home protocols, lowering the anxiety associated with your departure, teaching your dog how to be left alone, environmental changes as well as management and independence training.



Changes in pet-owner interactions

We are aiming to help the dog to become more independent. It involves ignoring your dog's attention-seeking behaviour and rewarding your dog for being calm and relaxed. This behavioural therapy is vital to the treatment of separation anxiety.

Changes in leaving and return routines

In an attempt to decrease the level of anxiety that these dogs exhibit prior to an owner's departure, it is recommended that the owner ignore the dog for 15-30 minutes prior to leaving. Upon return, they are to greet the dog softly and quietly, and attend to the dog **only** when it is calm and quiet. You may have to ignore your dog for 5-10 minutes when you return home.

Decreasing the anxiety associated with your departure

We need to change the pre-departure cues and re-teach the dog that the 'routine' no longer predicts your departure. This is accomplished through habituation, counter-conditioning and desensitisation which are explained below.

Habituation is a decrease in your dog's response as a consequence of repeated exposure to your departure. The goal is to disassociate the pre-departure cues from your actual departure. Examples include picking up keys, putting on shoes, packing briefcase, or picking up your handbag etc. Using the picking up keys as an example, through habituation, the owner picks up the keys, the dog alerts, becomes anxious and comes to the owner. The owner ignores the dog and undertakes an alternative activity and does not leave the house. You could randomly pick up your keys during TV commercials or pick up and move your handbag or briefcase as you go from room to room about the house. Consequently, the dog learns that the keys mean nothing. This is done

so that they no longer predict departure, no longer lead to an anxious response, and become less important to the dog and easier to ignore.

Counter-conditioning is a behaviour that is **behaviourally** and **physiologically** incompatible with another. A dog cannot be anxious and relaxed at the same time. In the case of separation anxiety, the dog is rewarded for relaxation and the technique is used to decrease the response of the dog to departure cues. For example, the dog is taught to sit/stay near an exit. If the dog is calm and relaxed, it is rewarded with a food treat or a pat and vocal praise "good dog". This process is usually used in combination with de-sensitisation.

De-sensitisation requires a dog to be exposed to a low-level anxiety-causing stimulus, in this case separation. This low-level anxiety response can be easily interrupted and diverted. *Gradually* the intensity of the stimulus can be increased, ideally without eliciting the anxious response. An owner can get closer to the door, eventually step outside the door, but returns quickly. As the dog learns the task, the owner can increase the time away.

Teaching the dog to be left alone at home

This involves gradually planning your departures, which use short absences to de-sensitise the dog to their owner leaving and being gone. Prior to this part of the treatment, the dog must have already been habituated to departure cues, de-sensitised to approaches to the door and have

some counter-conditioning default behaviours to fall back on.

Gradually planned departures are like real departures with two exceptions:

Initially the absences are very short i.e. walking to the letterbox and as you depart, you leave a new and consistent 'safety cue' or signal for the dog. The safety cue can be a visual and safe place such as a towel or rug that is put down just prior to departure. Crate training your dog for independence is a helpful technique in helping to reduce separation anxiety.



Environmental changes and management

Suggestions include increased play, exercise and mental stimulation – taking the dog for a walk in the morning may help to reduce their anxiety levels when they are alone during the day; 'Doggie Day Care', organising a dog sitter or walker to walk the dog during the day, 'mixing up' departure cues, masking departure with noise while the dog is busy with a toy in another room; providing food treats in dog toys such as "Kong's" so the dog can preoccupy themselves trying to access the food treat. You can use a scatter feeding technique and treasure hunts to help keep your dog mentally stimulated.

In some cases, where the dog may be a danger to itself (eg a dog that causes serious physical injury to itself due to anxiety) veterinarians may suggest a combination of medication and behavioural modification and training to help the dog.

Should you require any further information or support please feel free to contact the Animal Aid team on 9739 0300 or email kennels@animalaid.org.au