

Some people believe that a puppy who whines briefly after the owner leaves the room may have or will develop separation anxiety. That's not the case. But a dog who barks nonstop for hours after being left alone or exhibits some of the behaviors discussed below could very well be affected by the behavioral disorder. Fortunately, training by a qualified professional, sometimes combined with veterinary intervention, can be successful in treating it.

WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

Dogs are social animals, and they like to hang out with their pack. In certain animals, when they're left alone, it triggers a response of fear or even panic.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

Typically, when I meet with a new client to discuss behavior issues with their dog, we have an in-depth interview to properly identify the problem. This article isn't meant to diagnose or treat dogs I haven't personally evaluated, but there are a few common signs that can point to separation anxiety:

- Barking, howling
- Breaking of housetraining (some dogs might also eat their feces, a behavior called coprophagia)
- Chewing/destruction of property, especially at exit points, like doors and windows



Stay with Me

Of all the behavior issues I'm asked about at my dog training school, by far the most misunderstood is separation anxiety.

- Trying to escape
- Excessive licking or chewing themselves
- Drooling
- Pacing
- Attempting to prevent owner from leaving
- Greeting owner in a hyper, hysterical manner

While most of the behaviors on this list alone can also point to an untrained dog, a combination triggered by the absence of the dog's guardian usually indicates the issue is anxiety based.

WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

Like in people, mental-health issues in dogs can arise at any time and may stem from a variety of factors. Some common ones include:

Genetics. Some dogs have this issue hard-wired into them. I've met puppies from the same litter who have this issue show up in multiple generations of a particular line of dogs. That's why it's necessary to seek out a responsible breeder and ask questions about temperament.

Learned behavior. If one dog in a multi-dog household has anxiety, there's a good possibility that it can be passed to the others.

Life changes. You got a full-time job and are out of the house all day now. Someone moved into (or out of) your home. You moved into a new home. You got a divorce. A household member passed away.

BEFORE BEGINNING TREATMENT

It's important to talk to a veterinarian if you suspect your dog may have anxiety to rule out an underlying medical condition. For example, a urinary tract infection or side effects from medication could explain your dog having accidents while you're gone.

Also, consider your own commitment of time to your dog while you're home. It's possible chewing or destructive behavior are merely lapses in training or a lack of exercise.

HOW SEPARATION ANXIETY IS TREATED

Please note this issue is not a "quick fix." It's a problem that requires the expertise of a veterinary behavior expert and sometimes a medical professional, too. But some initial steps I take to help clients include the following:

Systematic desensitization is my preferred way to teach a dog that something he doesn't like will lead to something he does like. One way to start is by giving your dog a food puzzle toy before you leave the house. Vary the time frame that you give it to him so he can't predict when you're leaving. Sometimes give it to him 20 minutes before you leave, sometimes 2 minutes, sometimes 10, and never give it to him for any other reason. The idea is for your dog to love it when you leave. It's even better if the toy is frozen so that it takes

a long time for the dog to finish it.

Change your departure cue. In short, don't let your dog know when you're leaving by changing your routine. It might be something as subtle as the sound of your keys as you grab them before you go, or something you say to your dog as you leave. To fix this, start by picking up your keys, putting them down, and then doing something other than leaving (e.g., sit on the couch or make a call) so that eventually that action becomes a non-predictor of an event. As for what you say when you leave, how about saying nothing and just leaving? I promise your dog won't think you're rude.



It's not like walking out of the house without saying goodbye to your grandma.

Train his body and his mind. Every morning, my 18-week-old puppy (who doesn't have separation anxiety) and I get up to run around and complete some training. When I leave for work, he's ready for a nap. It's a rare occasion that he even notices I've left. He gets his breakfast in a frozen puzzle toy, which also works his brain, and by the time I return a few hours later, he's well-rested and ready for the next adventure.

Consider a Web Cam. It's helpful to use cameras to monitor your dog's behavior while



you're away. One model even lets you offer treats remotely. Note: Some people use the microphone feature to speak to their dogs while they're not home. Personally, I think that would freak my dogs out, so I do not use that feature.

SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

True separation anxiety can be a serious issue that escalates quickly, so I always recommend that people contact qualified dog professionals for a treatment plan. Your dog may benefit from behavior modification combined with veterinary intervention, including medication.

You absolutely owe it to yourself and your dog to find out what's at the root of this behavior so that you can solve the problem and reduce/eliminate the stress of it for both of you. **FD**

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