



Just the Facts About Canine Separation Anxiety

By Jenny Stevens, Seventh Heaven Pet Care Services

What is Canine Separation Anxiety and why should I be worried about it?

Separation Anxiety in dogs can be seen as a panic disorder that is a consequence of the dog not having learned to accept being alone as a normal part of the day. Covid-19 has caused us to get into very irregular patterns with our pets and particularly if your dog was adopted during the quarantine, it is quite possible that he has not had the chance to develop the confidence to deal with being left alone. Please note that not every dog having the same lived experience develops Separation Anxiety. There is no certainty about what exactly causes the condition.

Separation Anxiety can be confused with boredom. One key difference is that with boredom, you may see the following. “A playful adolescent dog who is looking for some action while you are away from home typically wreaks havoc in a variety of ways. He tears up the sofa cushions, pulls your shoes out of the closet, and gets into the trash.” Separation Anxiety behaviors are generally focused around the exits from the home. Your dog just wants to find a way to get to you.

Here is a useful chart from Julie Naismith’s book, *Be Right Back*

Problem Home- Alone Behavior	If it’s not separation anxiety, what else might be going on?
DESTRUCTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · A bored dog playing and having fun. · A teething puppy trying to soothe his sore gums · Mice or other infestations in the home · Senior dog cognitive issues · Noise or storm phobias

<p>HOUSE SOILING</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Medical issues · Housetraining slip-ups · Left too long without a pee break · Some medications · Cognitive dysfunction · Diet change · Parasites
<p>BARKING, HOWLING, WHINING</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Noises in the street · Noises in an apartment block · Someone at the door · Another dog howling · Noises in the home · Boredom

A good way to test this is to video your dog's behavior when you leave the house. You can use an old cell phone or any other recording device. Be sure to come back into the house if you see your pup's anxiety ratcheting up. Leaving a dog to panic will only make matters worse.

A few things to keep in mind as we explore this condition:

There is no reason to blame yourself for this problem.

There is no need to blame the dog either. He or she is not acting out of malice or trying to get back at you for leaving him/her alone.

The cause is not completely understood, and there is no way to predict whether or not a dog will be predisposed to Separation Anxiety, but we have the tools to fix it.

We have all been forced into a situation where we have put our “normal lives” on hold and while this is a serious issue for you and your pet, it is not anyone’s fault.

By finding out what the problem is and how you can go about solving it, you will ensure that your furry family member makes a smooth transition to normal life and you can leave the house without having to worry.

When should I start thinking about whether my dog has Separation Anxiety?

As soon as possible. You want to be able to devote the time to gradually expose your dog to alone time and be able to spend the time with your dog if he backslides. This is important whether you are thinking of heading back to work, the kids are getting back to school, or are planning travel that does not allow you to bring your dog. Imagine if you leave for a two-week vacation to visit family and your dog panics because he is being left alone? What will you be able to do to help? I am thinking that this would add stress to both you and your dog.

Okay, what can I do for my dog if I think that my dog might have Separation Anxiety?

- Look at the list for behaviors that might indicate Separation Anxiety. The most common are vocalization, destructive chewing/ scratching, or inappropriate elimination.

Here are some common indicators of Separation Anxiety:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoiding Eye Contact• Barking/ Howling/ Whining• Trembling/ Shaking• Clinging to the Owner• Nose licking• Defecation• Urination/ Dribbling• Furrowed Brows• Freezing or walking slowly	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overly “Excited” whiskers• Nipping out of context• Starting easily at changes/ noises• Self mutilation• Hiding• Decreased/ Increased eating• Hyper- vigilance• Panting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased heart rate• Blinking/ squinting• Increased grooming• Cowering• Yawning• Increased activity (panting)• Dilated pupils• Lifting paw• Lip licking• Repetitive behaviors• Increased reactivity
--	---	--

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ears lowered/ flattened • Growling/ aggression • “Whale Eye” or Staring • Mouth pursed forward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilo-erection (raised hair on back of the neck) • Rigid or forward stance • Destruction/ Door scratching • Anal sac expression • Hyper-salivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mouth closed tightly/ pulled back
---	---	---

*DeMartini-Price, CTC. Separation Anxiety in Dogs Next Generation Treatment Protocols and Practices. Wenatchee, Washington U.S.A., 2020.

- Take a video of your dog’s behavior when you leave and schedule a visit with your veterinarian. You will want to rule out any physical problems and get recommendations that may include medication or a referral to a Veterinary Behaviorist.

What is the basic protocol for Separation Anxiety treatment?

The first step is NEVER leaving your pup alone for a longer amount of time than they can handle. To determine how long that is, you can video your dog when you leave the house and time how long it takes for him to begin to show signs of stress.

While this sounds difficult, now is the time to get this protocol going while you are still able to be home and manage the incremental desensitization that will be used to solve the problem.

The second step is once you start a program, using any of the resources listed below, NEVER LET YOUR DOG GO OVER THEIR THRESHOLD.

Threshold refers to the limit past which your dog goes into a full-blown panic. Each time your dog experiences an episode in which he goes over that limit, it adds to the list of bad experiences that create an equivalency between being left alone and terror.

The rest of the process involves using an incremental approach to building your pup’s confidence. but the basic idea is to gradually desensitize your pup to your absence. This will take the form of brief excursions with your dog, brief trips away from the home, and creating positive associations with your departures. There is too much detail to go into the nuts and bolts of this process here, but the following list of resources will give you more detailed information.

Here are some different programs that you can look into:

- There are several great resources on the website including videos and ideas for structuring your training: [Fear Free Happy Homes](#).
- If you want to look into a comprehensive training program, you can visit [Malena DeMartini's Website](#) to either enroll in an online course that will teach you how to help your dog, or find a certified Separation Anxiety Specialist to coach you through the process.
- As a foundation for building confidence when alone, a great skill for your dog to learn is to Settle & Relax. There is a great online (Zoom-based) course to help teach your pup this skill through [The Animal Behavior Wellness Center , based in Fairfax, VA](#)
- If you are a reader and want to research the problems and some solid strategies, I recommend the following books:
 - *From Fearful to Fear-Free, By Marty Becker, DVM, et al*
 - *Be Right Back!* By Julie Naismith
 - *Separation Anxiety in Dogs*, by Malena DeMartini-Price
 - *I'll Be Home Soon How to Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety*, by Patricia B. McConnell, Ph. D

What can Seventh Heaven Pet Care Specialists do to help you and your pet deal with Separation Anxiety?

A large part of your program to help your pup get over Separation Anxiety will require that your dog is not left alone for very long, as the length of time increases, you will have more freedom. In the meantime, one of our Pet Care Specialists can take your pup for an extended walk. Maybe an hour that you can use to run errands or get something done.

The added benefit is that your dog will get to know a team of loving, supportive people who can help you get through this process with encouragement and can help with Midday walks going forward or those vacations that we are all looking forward to having!

Works Cited

From Fearful to Fear Free, Marty Becker, et al, Deerfield Beach, Florida, 2018

Preventing Separation Anxiety after Covid-19, Fact Sheet,
www.FearFreeHappyHomes.com

A Special Thanks to Dr. Amy Pike DVM, DACVB, IAABC-CABC and Justine from Catch Canine Trainer Academy for their help with this page.



<https://seventhheavenpets.care>

571.389.0091

Serving Northern Virginia