

TIER 2: PROTOCOL FOR TEACHING YOUR DOG TO UNCOUPLE CUES ABOUT YOUR DEPARTURES FROM THE DEPARTURE

Why You Should Not Use This Protocol

This protocol should not be attempted unless you are extremely able to read your dog's signals and can ensure that you are only rewarding relaxed behaviors. If this is not the case, the risk with this protocol is that you will make your dog much, much worse, and sensitize her to all behaviors that are associated with leaving her alone.

How to Use This Protocol If You Think It Will Help

There are two components to *beginning* to teach dogs not to react anxiously when you leave them.

1. The first component involves resisting the normal tendency to reassure an unhappy dog, and instead, asking her to sit and to be calm (see the **Protocol for Deference** and the **Protocol for Relaxation: Tier 1**).
2. The second component involves teaching the dog to relax upon request (**Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**) so that you can reward her for being calm while she gradually learns to be left alone (see the **Protocol for Separation Anxiety** and **Tier 2: Protocol for Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning Using Gradual Departures**).

Dogs who become distressed after you have left probably become distressed before you leave. You need to be alert for the behavioral cues that distress is occurring—panting, pacing, whining, digging, trembling, not eating, et cetera—and ensure that you do not inadvertently reward such cues by telling your dog that she is “okay,” when she is clearly distressed. She knows she is not okay. In truth, you are only rewarding and reinforcing your dog for being anxious.

Using Triggers for Anxious Behaviors

If you wish to reverse this trend, you *may* be able to focus on triggers for your dog's anxious behaviors.

- Before your dog becomes distressed, make sure you reward her calm behaviors. Talk happily to her; massage her; if offered, rub her belly and chest very slowly. If you cannot do this without your dog panting or moving around, she was already distressed when you started. You cannot desensitize dogs to triggers or cues of their distress if you do not know what those triggers or cues are. *If your dog is already upset when you awaken, desensitizing her to “departure cues” may actually sensitize her to cues that signal your departure is approaching.*
- If you can interact in a truly calm way with your dog on a day when you know you will later leave, you may be able to teach her that she can divorce the cues or signals you give when you are about to leave from her anxiety at your departure.
- Make a list of all of the things that you do differently on days when you leave compared with days when you stay home. If setting the alarm is something that you only do on days that you leave, this may be the most important clue to the dog. This is a problem. Although you can

desensitize your dog to an alarm, the process will be complicated because the dog has an ongoing and prolonged state of arousal. Your best chance at intervening in this type of arousal is with medication.

- If you notice that your dog reacts *only* to other very timely signals—briefcases, keys, gym bags, certain items of clothing—start to go through the same routine that you use when leaving, but then sit down and watch television, read a book, or throw a toy for your dog. If you always go to the health club with a gym bag, pick up your gym bag and go make dinner. If you only wear high heels and makeup when you go to work, wear them, instead, on a Sunday, and spend the day by the fire reading the newspaper. You get the idea.
- All dogs are different. Some dogs only react when the keys are picked up, others only when the car is started, some because of the hour at which their people awake when going to work, and still others because of the presence of absence of a meal or a type of food. These are typical examples; your dog may respond to something different.
- Whatever specific event triggers anxiety in your dog needs to be uncoupled from your actual departure. If your dog becomes more relaxed when you practice uncoupling a cue, *reward her with praise and treats*. This is exactly what you want. However, if you do not think the dog is relaxing, or if you think that her anxiety is increasing, *please stop trying to desensitize her to departure cues*. You will be able to tell if you are making your dog worse or better by videotaping yourself working with your dog and watching her responses.
- The more lead time between the dog's first arousal cue and your departure, the more difficult teaching your dog to uncouple cues will be.
- You may also wish to use this program in reverse: uncouple the cues that you are staying home from staying home. For example, if you only eat breakfast on weekends when you stay home, start eating breakfast on weekdays. If you only wear jogging clothes on weekends, wear them to work and change there. Again, caution is urged. If your dog now starts to react to your jogging clothes or preparation of breakfast no matter what the day is, *please stop trying to desensitize her with departure cues*. You are making her more anxious.

Roles for Safety Cues

You may be able to condition your dog to relax when a safety signal is present. This tells the dog that something may happen, but because she recognizes the cue, she can and will be able to relax as practiced. Safety cues will likely help only mildly affected dogs, but they are worth practicing. As an example, you play a specific, easily recognizable piece of music, while practicing relaxation and breathing with your dog. Your dog learns that the music signals that she can now display the relaxed feeling taught by the relaxation and breathing exercises. You can then use this piece of music to help to teach the dog to relax when you are leaving (or, by remote control, when you are not there).

The anxiety induced by the specific event that your dog associates with your departure is often a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the dog can be taught not to become anxious in the first place, whether through use of medication or a safety cue, she can learn not to be anxious when you are gone. Please remember that what we know about anxiety indicates that it is a cascade phenomenon: Once you get upset, it is easier to become more upset, more quickly.

What Other Choices Do You Have?

If your dog worsens when you scramble cues and routines, please stop doing so. Talk to your veterinarian and consider

doggie daycare, at home care, taking the pet with you to work when possible, et cetera. Meanwhile, continue to work with the active behavior modification protocols while your dog is taking medication. If your dog needs this protocol, you can return to it later, when she is better able to learn from it. With long-term medication and other work, you may learn that your dog figures out for herself that she doesn't have to worry about cues associated with leaving because she now can think more rationally about everything. If so, this is terrific!

Anti-anxiety medications may be essential for some dogs affected by separation anxiety, but please remember that medication is to be used **in addition** to the behavior modification, not instead of it.