

## PROTOCOL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TREATING DOGS WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY

Dogs with separation anxiety traditionally exhibit a number of behaviors associated with distress when they are left alone (a “real” absence). The rarer dog exhibits these signs if she is denied access to you (a “virtual” absence). These clingy dogs very likely form a discrete subset of dogs affected with separation anxiety, and may have other problems that may not be relevant for many dogs with separation anxiety. The rarest subset of these dogs has been said to be “hyper-attached”: affected dogs always are within touching distance of their human and will experience distress with increasing distance or if they cannot see or touch their humans, although they are not truly “separated.”

### Non-specific Signs of Separation Anxiety

Common signs of the distress experienced by dogs affected with any form of separation anxiety include:

- destruction of objects in the house,
- destruction of the house,
- vocalization (whining or ritualistic barking, howling, or yipping),
- urination,
- defecation,
- vomiting,
- salivation,
- continuous pacing, and
- complete inactivity/freezing behaviors (sometimes while staring at the door).

### Patterns of Distress

For dogs who become distressed during “real” absences, the amount of time that they can be left alone without becoming distressed can be extremely variable. In profound cases of separation anxiety, dogs can be left alone for no more than minutes before they panic and exhibit these behaviors associated with anxiety. In such cases, it is important to realize that *panic is a co-varying or associated diagnosis* and that to successfully treat the dog with separation anxiety, you will have to also treat the panic. This is important because the medications that are used to treat panic are different from those used to treat anxiety-related conditions. If both panic and separation anxiety are issues, you will need to use both types of medication, in addition to expanded behavior modification, to treat both conditions.

In many cases of separation anxiety, the inappropriate behavior is only apparent after a schedule change. For instance, the dog may be fine until 5:30 or 6:00 at night when you are accustomed to coming home. If your schedule changes and now they are not home until 7:30, the dog may start to panic at 6:00 o'clock.

There are changes that appear spontaneously in some older dogs that may be associated with an old age onset version of separation anxiety. In this case, for no apparent reason, a dog who has been able to be left alone for all his life can no longer be left alone. When left, these dogs now appear confused and distressed, and may exhibit any of the behaviors listed above.

In some cases, the dog is only distressed if one particular person leaves, whereas in other cases the dog is fine as long

as some human—any human, known or unknown—is in the house.

Oddly, studies show that the presence of cats or other dogs does not seem to have an effect on whether the dog is distressed or not.

In some cases, the fear of being left alone can be associated with horrific events. These events include being caught in a fire, or being in the house when a burglary was attempted, or being stuck in the house when an alarm system went off. Dogs, in these situations, may have a worse experience than dogs for whom separation anxiety develops more gradually, and may benefit at the outset from stronger medications.

Most separation anxiety in dogs appears to be “idiopathic,” meaning that we don’t understand what’s causing it. It’s likely that these dogs are truly abnormal in their reactivity at some neurochemical level.

Dogs who are at risk for separation anxiety include those rescued from humane shelters, those rescued from lab situations, those rescued from the street, and those who have spent extended periods of their life in kennels, or with one older, housebound person. That said, some dogs who have experienced stable upbringing may still develop separation anxiety as their brain chemistry changes during social maturation (approximately 1 to 2 years of age).

It’s important to realize that dogs who have spent time in humane shelters—recycled pets—may have a higher incidence of separation anxiety than is found in the dog population as a whole, not because shelters induce such problems, but because dogs with behavior problems are at huge risk for being abandoned or dumped in a shelter. For these dogs, the uncertainty of their state is likely to worsen any anxiety, and dogs who have experienced rehoming multiple times may have had their uncertainty strongly reinforced.

As is true for most behavioral problems, we have no idea what the true incidence of separation anxiety is in the general population. It’s likely that there are many dogs who are at risk, but show no signs of the condition because they are never left alone. In this case, our estimates of the numbers of dogs affected will be artificially low.

The steps below are designed to teach these dogs that they do not have to be anxious, scared, or fearful, and they do not have to have panic attacks when they are left alone. Please remember, separation anxiety can be extremely variable across dogs: many dogs may respond favorably if given a smaller space where they can feel secure, while others will panic if put in a crate. *If the dog panics when put in an enclosed space or in a crate, no matter how big or comfortable the space or crate is, or what room it is in, please do not force the dog to be crated or confined.* You will make the situation worse.

Some dogs can be left in a room and be comfortable, but will panic if truly “enclosed.” Please observe and video your dog and ensure that the manner in which you contain her for safety isn’t accidentally making the anxiety worse.

### Step 1: Behavior Modification

The first step of this program that is designed to teach dogs to not be anxious when left alone involves teaching the dog to take all cues from you (**Protocol for Deference**). As your



Some of the first signs of damage associated with separation anxiety may be seen on doors.



Serious destruction can be involved when a dog with separation anxiety panics.

dog learns the **Protocol for Deference**, he can learn to relax using the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**. Your dog will need to be able to successfully learn from both of these protocols before he can start the first tier

of the active behavior modification program (**Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**).

These programs are designed to teach the dog to look at you, to be calm, and then to “sit or lie down,” “stay,” and “relax” while you engage in a variety of behaviors, some of which may ultimately be upsetting to the dog, in a benign and protected circumstance. Once the dog can do all of these behaviors perfectly for every person in the household in each room in the house without reacting, and he can do the same behaviors outside and remain calm, your dog may be noticeably improved. Many dogs are so improved that their people are happy. Some dogs will benefit from additional tiers of active behavior modification.

Before focusing on the more complex behavior mod programs, please understand that the **Protocol for Deference** is designed to teach the dog that he has to “sit” (or lie down if this is physically more comfortable for the dog) and “stay” and look happy and relaxed. If the dog is truly relaxed, the dog is always praised or rewarded. This is harder than it sounds.

The difficult part of this program involves ensuring that you do not *accidentally* reward small, anxious behaviors. Please remember that dogs with separation anxiety are anxious. *These dogs are not just anxious in situations in which they are left alone, they are probably anxious in a variety of contexts, and it is important to be able to distinguish behaviors that signal anxiety from those that do not.* Once you can do this, you can reward the calm behaviors and ignore those that signal anxiety.

**The single most important step in the treatment of any of these dogs is also the most commonly skipped step: reward the dog whenever the dog is calm, even if this calmness is spontaneous and not requested by you.** The more relaxed behaviors you can encourage the dog to incorporate into daily life, the better off everyone will be. This means that you should even reward the dog when he is sleeping or napping as these are variants of calm behaviors.

You will make progress most quickly if everyone practices the behavior modification programs at least daily. If you can practice more often, the dog will improve more quickly. Most of us do not have 30 minutes at a time to practice, but we can engage in five or six 3- to 5-minute sessions of work with the dog daily. Working for at least a few minutes every day to help the dog relax is extremely important. Finally, if you are unable to get everyone in the household to work with the dog, you must ensure that no one is sabotaging your efforts. Not participating is different from active interference with helping the dog to learn to relax.

Your dog may benefit from the **Protocol for Gradual Departures: Behavior Modification Tier 2**, a second tier of behavior modification program for dogs with separation anxiety. This program involves teaching the dog that he can be left alone for gradually increasing increments of time without experiencing distress. Unfortunately, there are two problems with this approach that are usually not discussed.

- For many dogs who become panicky, leaving is not the problem. The problem is the panic and that may start as soon as their human signals in any way that they may leave the dog that day (e.g., a wakeup alarm goes off; most people only set alarms on days when they must leave). Teaching these dogs to relax as you go in and out of a door is not addressing their issue. If these dogs are already

aroused when you try to teach them not to worry about people going through doors, you can actually make these dogs worse.

- Relaxation is essential if you wish the dog to improve. Most people focus on the dog's ability to sit and not destroy something or bark when teaching them gradual departures. Unfortunately, this means the dog is becoming sensitized to the departures but not able to show the behaviors associated with distress. In short, the dog becomes worse and suffers more.

If we know that the dog's distress is triggered by the departure, we can accurately monitor the dog's responses to this program, and if we can see a benefit, this tier of the behavior modification may be useful.

## Step 2: Enclosing and Protecting the Dog When Left—Safety First

If possible—and only if the dog is happy enclosed—crate the dog or isolate her in a small room when you are not at home. This has less to do with making the dog feel “safe”—something often stated but never proved—than it does with minimizing damage and protecting the dog. Make sure that the crate and the room are puppy proof. There should be:

- no dangling cords,
- no exposed electric outlets, and
- no open areas of water, such as a toilet, in which a dog can drown.

Unless they destroy and ingest bedding, please make sure they have a blanket and/or bedding, water, toys, and a biscuit.

### Should You Use a Crate?

Dogs who do not go willingly into their crates and seem happy to be there should not be contained in crates. What the human may perceive as secure, the dog could perceive as entrapment. If the dog's crate is left open when everyone is home and the dog chooses to spend time in it with the door open, chances are that the dog will be content when the door is closed. Regardless, all dogs left in crates should periodically be videoed. No dog who exhibits real or increasing signs of true distress should be forced to remain in a crate. Dogs have been known to break all of their teeth and nails in attempts to escape crates. Increasing the size of the crate or changing the style is generally not sufficient to render the dog content because the issue is that the dog feels entrapped and panics.

*Never leave a collar, a head collar, a lead, or a harness on a dog while in a crate or run.* Any dog can catch any collar on a crate and strangle to death. This tragic outcome may be more likely to occur with anxious dogs because they are often moving in unpredictable directions.

Anything that can be destroyed and ingested—or that you cannot bear to have destroyed—should be taken out of the room. If necessary, Plexiglas can be placed against and secured to the walls so that if the dog does become upset, no further damage is done. Please remember that once the dog starts to do damage, it is possible that the damaging behavior becomes self-perpetuating.

Never, *ever*, use the crate as punishment. Crates and safe rooms must be areas where the dog is content and feels secure.

## Step 3: Providing Stimulation and Information for the Dog When Left

Make sure that the crate or safe room is in a brightly lit, temperature-controlled area. No dog is going to enjoy being thrown in a dank, dark garage just because that is the easiest place to clean up. Leave on a TV, CDs or a radio, and lights for the dog while you are gone.

Give the dog a fresh food toy when you leave (see the **Protocol for Choosing Toys for Your Pet**). Food toys will not “fix” a dog with separation anxiety, but they are good monitors of improvement in the dog's distress. Distressed dogs cannot eat. If the food toy is something that your dog would love were you present, you will be able to tell when the dog is beginning to improve because some of the food will be gone.

Make use of a signal that tells the dog when you are within 15 to 30 minutes of your arrival home (a light and a radio on a timer).

If the dog can learn to respond to this signal through short departures over the weekend, you can use it in the behavior modification program. You can try this by setting a light and timer on and coming into a room where the dog is sitting and relaxing for short periods. Every time you come in, the light should come in. Every time you leave, you reset it. If you can work with the dog to the point where you can leave the dog and have her remain calm for 15 to 30 minutes after the signal comes on, you may be able to use this as a signal throughout the day to cue the dog to relax. To implement this strategy of using the signal as a cue for relaxation correctly you will likely need help from a professional trainer (see [www.petprofessionalguild.com](http://www.petprofessionalguild.com) or [www.apdt.com](http://www.apdt.com) for a list of Certified Professional Dog Trainers).

## Step 4: Alternative Coping Strategies for Dogs Who Must Be Left

- Because some dogs only react inappropriately when one specific person leaves the house, consider whether it is possible to have that person take the dog to work. If the dog is otherwise well mannered and clean, this is becoming a more popular option.
- If it is not possible to take the dog with you, consider using a doggie daycare center, a pet sitter, or asking whether your veterinarian or kennel offers day boarding.
- If you only go out to shop, learn if your dog is distressed when left alone in the car. Many dogs who cannot be left alone in a house or apartment *can* be left alone in a car. The car seems to signal to them that the trips are short and you always return. There is also a lot of additional stimulation for them when in a car, and if they are not distressed they may benefit from it. Do not leave the dog alone in the car unless you are positive the dog will not destroy it. If you are going to use this coping strategy, please ensure that the dog travels safely in the car and is left safely in the car. No dog should be left in any situation where he can overheat or become excessively chilled. Please remember that when it is 80° F, the inside temperature in a car often reaches 140° F to 160° F. At such temperatures, dogs can die within 15 minutes.
- Many dog walkers are now offering multiple daily visits—with or without some behavior mod practice—as one of their services. This strategy works well for dogs who can go 3, but not 4, hours without attention.



## Step 5: Bringing the Outside World and Its Information to the Dog Who Is Left Alone

Some dogs do best if they can observe the outside world.

- If your crate can be placed by French, sliding glass, or patio doors, the dog will do better than if he only has a wall to look at all day. If dogs can be calm enough to look at the outside world, having access to it will provide them with a needed and secure pattern and mental stimulation. Please ensure that as the sun moves the dog cannot overheat. Dogs who are crated cannot get up and move away if they are too warm.
- If you have an outdoor run that is sturdily enclosed (and has a roof) and is in a location where no one can steal or abuse the dog, some of these distressed dogs do much better if they are outside. This is certainly an option worth investigating. There are now numerous heated beds, dog houses or shelters, and water dishes that are commercially available that would allow people to comfortably have their dog remain in a run in colder climates. Putting a dog in an outside run should not be viewed as a “containment strategy.” It is not. Instead, if the dog can be happier and calmer in the run *and does not feel entrapped* by this, an outdoor run can be one helpful aspect of a larger treatment program.

## Step 6: Should You Try to Teach About “Departure Cues”?

If you can identify cues that tell your dog you are going to be leaving, you *may* be able to desensitize the dog to those cues. If you wish to try this you can read how to do so in the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Uncouple Cues About Your Departure from the Departure**. Things that dogs use as cues often include putting on makeup, grabbing your briefcase, dressing in a suit, setting an alarm, getting up at 6 o’clock in the morning and putting on “real clothes” immediately, picking up your keys, et cetera. You can desensitize the dog to any or all of those cues.

- In other words, pick up your keys and don’t go anywhere, put on makeup and high heels on the weekend, leave for your legal practice wearing a jogging suit, go out a different door than you usually do, change your pattern of things that you do prior to leaving.
- Start to water the plants before you leave instead of rushing out the door.

Anything you can do to decouple the cues the dog uses as a signal for your departure with the dog’s actual initiation of anxiety-based behaviors (e.g., pacing, panting, whining, pupil dilation, movements of ears, frequent solicitation of attention, hiding, jumping up and down in solicitation of behavior) may help *if, by uncoupling these cues from your departure, the dog is calmer*.

If you work intently on these cues over a couple of weekends, you *may* totally uncouple them in a relatively short period of time. For dogs with fairly mild separation anxiety that is triggered only by the cue, this will help. For this to work you need to be able to note that a specific behavior is decreasing in form, in intensity or in frequency. If you cannot measure changes in the behavior or you do not see these changes going in the right direction, caution is urged in using this technique.

*Please be aware that you can also sensitize dogs to these cues and teach them that now the cues are unreliable.* Instead of helping your dog, your dog now begins to worry more and all the time and *you have made your dog worse*. Please monitor your dog’s behaviors using a written log, a video, or both so that you can see whether what you are attempting is making the dog better or worse.

Also, please remember that in profound cases of separation anxiety, the cues may matter less than the actual absence. In this case, desensitizing the dog to cues associated with departure may not generalize to not being distressed when left. If you have to decide how to spend your time, spend it teaching the dog that being left is okay.

## Step 7: When Medication Can Help

Finally, *the vast majority of these dogs will require some form of antianxiety medication to improve*. This is the humane choice. Most of the anti-anxiety medications have rather limited side effects, but tremendous benefits. If you are worried or dislike the idea of medication, you can certainly work with the dog using only behavior modification at first. This will actually give you a good baseline of the dog’s behaviors against which you can compare later changes, with or without medication. But if the dog worsens at any point, or if his improvement stops, please consider adding medication to his treatment plan.

After you are through with the first tier of the behavior modification program, your dog may be placed on the second tier designed to get her to not react to gradual departures. At that point, we can always reassess the need for medication, but usually starting dogs out on anti-anxiety medication provides us with a real edge at any time. In all of the placebo-controlled double-blind studies, medication has been shown to speed the rate of recovery over that achieved with behavior modification alone, and dogs treated with medication have been shown to acquire the behavior mod more quickly.

Please remember that if your dog has any component of panic in their presentation of the signs of separation anxiety, you will need to give them an antipanic medication approximately 2 hours before you leave, as needed, in addition to their daily medication for anxiety. This sounds like a lot of medication, but because the classes of drugs (panic: benzodiazepines or centrally acting alpha-agonists; anxiety: tricyclic antidepressants [TCAs] or selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors [SSRIs]) act synergistically or together, you may need less of each medication, overall, to get a better effect.

In most, but not all cases, dogs can be weaned from the antipanic medication, even though they may stay on the anti-anxiety medication (see **Protocol for Using Behavioral Medication Successfully**).

Please note that many dogs with separation anxiety also have noise phobias and/or other anxiety-related conditions and unless **all** of these conditions are treated, none will improve to the extent possible. Noise and storm phobias may be types of panic conditions, and so will generally benefit from the same types of medication when given on an “as-needed” basis.

## Outcomes

Dogs with separation anxiety can improve to the point where no one realizes that they have had a problem. Some of these

dogs may always watch humans differently. Some of these dogs are more prone to other conditions like panic, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and noise/storm phobias. If any of these other conditions are also issues they must be treated.

Treatment may be lifelong, and if there are changes in the household—a human or dog dies, people move away—the dog may experience a relapse. As with all behavioral conditions, early intervention is really important. If the social or physical change in the household is a planned change (e.g., a

marriage), please talk to your veterinarian about anticipating this change and adjusting medication and behavioral care so that the dog moves through this period of transition as painlessly as possible.

The table below will help you to assess the extent to which your dog is affected and to monitor changes in behavior as improvement occurs. If you complete this table once or twice a week as soon as you note the problem, the effect of absences and of treatment will be apparent.

### Daily/Weekly Schedule for Dogs with Separation Anxiety

Day/Date:

Absence #/Time Left	Maintenance Style	Amount of Time Left	Signs Noted
Absence 1 Time:	a. Left free b. Crated c. Confined in room d. Left outside—dog house or run e. Left outside—fenced f. Outside—free/unrestrained g. Other—please note:	a. Less than 5 minutes b. 5-10 minutes c. 10-20 minutes d. 20-30 minutes e. 30 minutes—1 hour f. 1-2 hours g. 2-4 hours h. 4-6 hours i. 6-8 hours j. More than 8 hours	a. None b. Urination c. Defecation d. Destruction e. Vocalization f. Salivation g. Other—please note:
Absence 2 Time:	a. Left free b. Crated c. Confined in room d. Left outside—dog house or run e. Left outside—fenced f. Outside—free/unrestrained g. Other—please note:	a. Less than 5 minutes b. 5-10 minutes c. 10-20 minutes d. 20-30 minutes e. 30 minutes—1 hour f. 1-2 hours g. 2-4 hours h. 4-6 hours i. 6-8 hours j. More than 8 hours	a. None b. Urination c. Defecation d. Destruction e. Vocalization f. Salivation g. Other—please note:
Absence 3 Time:	a. Left free b. Crated c. Confined in room d. Left outside—dog house or run e. Left outside—fenced f. Outside—free/unrestrained g. Other—please note:	a. Less than 5 minutes b. 5-10 minutes c. 10-20 minutes d. 20-30 minutes e. 30 minutes—1 hour f. 1-2 hours g. 2-4 hours h. 4-6 hours i. 6-8 hours j. More than 8 hours	a. None b. Urination c. Defecation d. Destruction e. Vocalization f. Salivation g. Other—please note: