

Separation Anxiety

There's a lot of controversy surrounding the term "separation anxiety." It is definitely a real, diagnose-able problem, although it is over-diagnosed. Below are lists of probable and possible symptoms to help you determine if your dog does have separation anxiety, and some tips to help you solve simpler problems that are sometimes misdiagnosed as separation anxiety.

Probable Symptoms

These behaviors would indicate that your dog might indeed, have separation anxiety.

- Not eating food or treats that are left out while you're away, especially if it's something they really love and they eat it right away when you get home (so they've clearly realized it was there but they were too stressed to eat while you were not present).
- Destructive chewing, scratching, clawing at exit routes: blinds, doorways, windowpanes (if dog is indoors) or fence, gates, door to house (if dog is outdoors), as opposed to, say, chewing on a chair leg or shoe. Is the destruction severe and intense? Many animals will paw at a crate door a bit, but will stop. If their nails, pads, teeth are worn down or they're panting from exhaustion, then it's an indication of real separation anxiety.
- Pacing, whining, panting, drooling, dilated pupils, following you more than usual during your departure routine (for example, every time you get your car keys out or put on your "work" shoes, putting on make-up or drying your hair – anything that serves as a "cue" that you're departing).
- Excessive panting, pacing, drooling, or whining while you are gone (you might find out from neighbors, or the bedding in a crate might be soaked through when you return, or the stress signs will still be in evidence when you return). You also may want to film the dog in your absence to better assess his behavior while you are away.

Possible Symptoms

The following are possible indicators of separation anxiety, but are more likely indicators of more simple problems. If you ONLY see the behaviors below, try other solutions first. A good way to test is to leave an extremely tasty treat (such as a meaty bone, fish—whatever your dog thinks is the best thing to eat) for the dog; go through your regular routine and leave. Drive around for five minutes. If the treat is still there when you come home, and your dog has any of the other indicators listed, then your dog may have separation anxiety.

- Barking and whining. Is the dog sitting and barking at a window when people, dogs, squirrels, cats, etc. walk by? Is the barking or whining excessive (doesn't stop until you return or they become exhausted)? Remember that when you're first crate training or alone training your dog, you should expect more barking or whining initially. Always leave a stuffed chew toy or several stuffed chew toys when your dog is left alone; this will help to indicate if the dog is merely barking out of boredom or if he really has separation anxiety. If your dog is recreationally barking, the stuffed chew toy should eliminate the problem within a few weeks.

- House soiling. House soiling alone is never separation anxiety. You must see at least one other behavior from the probable category to consider this a possible case of separation anxiety. See our section on “[house training](#)” to help your dog learn house manners.
- Chewing. If your dog is not specifically targeting and destructively chewing exit ways, then she is more likely chewing for recreation. Leave some stuffed [chew toys](#) whenever your dog is left alone. If your dog is recreationally chewing, she should learn to chew the chew toys, rather than other items, after a few weeks. Also see our handout on [house training](#) to learn more about chew toy training.

If you are still unsure whether or not your dog has true separation anxiety, or if your dog has symptoms that indicate that he does, the good news is that it is extremely treatable if treated appropriately by a professional. Because the treatment is complex and very specific, you should get the help of a professional rather than attempting to treat it by yourself. Below is a list of reputable resources.

To find a trainer

The Association of Pet Dog Trainers—to find a suitable, dog friendly, Certified Pet Dog Trainer (C.P.D.T) in your area:

www.apdt.com

Additional resources

The following books are meant to be an additional resource, not a solution in and of themselves. Please seek professional help to treat separation anxiety.

These books can be purchased at www.dogwise.com.

Canine Separation Anxiety Workbook, James O'Hare

I'll Be Home Soon, Patricia McConnell

Dogs Home Alone, Roger Abrantes

Dogs are From Neptune, Jean Donaldson