

# Dog separation anxiety: telltale signs and helping owners

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## ABSTRACT


Separation anxiety is a term used frequently within the veterinary community to describe a series of negative behaviours when a dog is left alone. Between 20% and 40% of dogs presented to behavioural referral clinics were diagnosed with the problem (Horwitz, 2002). An estimated 7.8 million dogs are in the UK, one in four homes has a dog and five million dogs are left at home alone for three or more hours every weekday (Evans, 2013). It is very distressing for dogs and their owners when they are unable to cope with a situation that could occur frequently.

Often, owners do not know how to handle such situations and will come to the veterinary clinic seeking help and reassurance. It is a complex subject, and not one to be taken lightly because left untreated, the condition is very likely to deteriorate. Owners can often find themselves in neighbour disputes due to excessive noise and with possible legal action pending. So, what should we really be looking at in these problems and how should we begin to help owners and their dogs overcome these issues to ensure a happy, harmonious family life?

**The term “separation anxiety” has been superseded by the broader term “separation-related disorder”, of which maladaptive anxiety – the subject of this article – is the most severe form.**

## Definition

**Separation anxiety – anxiety provoked by separation or the threat of separation (*Oxford Dictionaries*, 2015).**



Dogs are social animals and, as such, are usually most comfortable and relaxed within a social setting. When an individual is separated from its social group, it can exhibit distress signs. These are many and varied, but can include inappetence, house soiling and destruction.

These behaviours, although undesirable, are normal and performed naturally to try to increase the chance of the animal reuniting with its social group (**Table 1**). Domestic dogs view the humans they live with as part of their social group and, therefore, can suffer emotional distress when separated from family members.

Furthermore, the relationship dogs have with their human families differs from that which they may have with conspecifics in one important aspect. Dogs form secure attachment-type relationships, which share the same properties of the relationship a child has with its parent. The consequence of this unique relationship is the behaviours they then display, which can have profound social effects and is commonly cited as a reason for relinquishment.

## Signs



**Figure 1.** Damage to items or property can be severe.

It is clear, in many cases, when a dog is suffering with separation issues. Owners may report severe damage when left alone (**Figure 1**), neighbours may report excessive barking or howling, the owner may be exasperated by the loss of toilet training, but many more subtle clues may present that indicate a dog is distressed about a situation or an impending situation. These could be early indications a problem is developing and, if left untreated, will only get worse.

Early signs may be as simple as a dog that follows owners around constantly, whimpering, depression, attention-seeking behaviour, trembling as the owner leaves, general over-attachment signs and even mild signs of aggression. Some dogs will also show an exaggerated response when the owner returns – another example of the anxiety they are experiencing when left alone.

There may have been an incident in a dog's life that started the anxious behaviour. It may have been a startling event when it was alone, such as a firework scare, thunderstorm or burglary attempt and from then on, understandably, it feels uncomfortable and anxious when left. Other dogs can develop anxiety over time, after a change in routine or as a consequence of getting older – for example, canine cognitive disorders. If an owner has been present at home for a while, such as on maternity leave or due to illness, some dogs will then not be able to cope when their owner is not present.

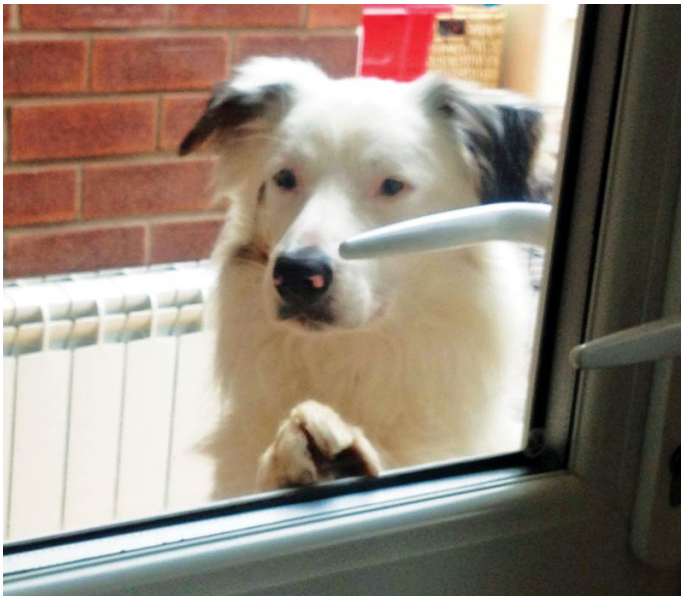
## Aetiology and diagnosis

It is important to ensure behaviours exhibited are due to genuine separation anxiety and not alternative problems. Excessive vocalisation could be related to outside stimulation, workmen in the area or neighbouring cats or dogs being around. House soiling could be as a result of inadequate toilet training or poor planning.

Destruction could be due to under-stimulation and boredom or lack of appropriate exercise, while self-trauma could have an underlying medical problem, such as allergies, which the owner, when present, prevents the animal paying attention to. This highlights the need for a full and thorough examination and consultation before embarking on a treatment programme.

## Treatment

Before starting a separation anxiety programme, it is essential to establish how behaviour presents, when it began and what changes in emotional state are driving it. Separation issues can be obvious when a dog is left alone completely or a particular person is absent despite the presence of others. Fear-related anxiety may require a different programme to resolving an attachment anxiety, although the latter is often accompanied by significant hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal stress response.



**Figure 2.** Prolonging the exit process will cause further distress.

The aim of any programme is to teach the dog how to cope with the separation from its family – this needs to be done slowly, gently, positively and with understanding of the motivation. All cases will have subtle differences and require a subtly different plan. Changes may need to be made to pet-

owner interactions, leaving and returning protocols, decreasing the anxiety pre-departure and to the dog's physical environment.

Owners who have a strong, single person relationship should look at encouraging their dog to function more independently from them on a day to day basis. This can be achieved only by working with the dog while the animal is calm and relaxed. It will not work and should never be attempted during times the dog is being left.

This may mean ignoring all attention-seeking behaviours, not allowing the dog to sit on furniture or sleep in the owner's bedroom, ensuring the owner initiates all interactions, rewarding calm behaviours and encouraging the dog to play alone. This will help the dog to feel more comfortable on its own and less reliant on the owner.

The owner must not pay a great deal of attention to the dog on leaving or returning to the house as this can cause excitement, with some owners delaying their exit to try to settle the dog; however, it simply prolongs its distress (**Figure 2**).

It can be helpful if the dog can be ignored for 15 to 30 minutes prior to leaving, or taught to respond positively to a quiet cue (see counter-conditioning) and ignored for a period on return with only quiet calmness being rewarded. Employing the services of a regular dog walker or minder can help single person dogs to form relationships with others.

## Habituation

Leaving patterns can cause anxiety as a dog learns triggers to its owner leaving. An owner coming downstairs in uniform, packing a bag, making a packed lunch, putting on a coat and gathering keys, his or her mobile phone and wallet can begin to increase stress levels of a dog.

Habituation is an extremely simple form of learning in which an animal, after a period of exposure to a stimulus, stops responding (Breed, 2001). Habituation can be used to prevent association of certain triggers resulting in the anxious behaviour. Owners should pack lunches or take bags to the car at times when they then don't leave the house. They could wear their uniform in the house or leave in plain clothes to change into uniform once at work.

In mild cases, distraction techniques can also be used, such as turning on the washing machine or radio, or a food-stuffed toy/puzzle feeder being given so the owner can depart without being the focus of attention.

Care must be taken with habituation as some dogs will find the presentation of these triggers so overwhelming it will increase their general anxiety. It must be performed only when the dog is calm and relaxed, and not overdone.

## Counter-conditioning

Counter-conditioning can help reinforce the belief the owner will return. The dog is taught to perform an alternative behaviour on cue and is rewarded for that behaviour. The dog may be given a command, such as “go to bed” or “sit”, and is then rewarded.

The owner will, over time, start to introduce the triggers for leaving, slowly moving towards the door, always rewarding the calm behaviour and not actually leaving. This can be built up over a course of days or weeks until the owner can step outside and close the door, albeit briefly, and return to reward the calm behaviour.

During a time of counter-conditioning training, it is most useful to not leave the dog alone, the help of friends, relatives, dog sitters, doggy day care and so on is essential. This is a key element of this programme and is vital to its success. As a support to this strategy, the veterinary surgeon may be able to provide pharmacological support to help moderate an acute negative emotional response in the dog.

Habituation and counter-conditioning can be used together to make planned departures more acceptable to the dog. These departures should be momentary (one to two minutes) at first and built over time. All normal leaving triggers must be performed so the dog understands the owner is leaving.

## Environment



**Figure 3.** An example of a relaxed dog in its crate.

Environment will play a massive part in how well the dog copes with being left alone. Preventing the dog from causing itself harm should be the priority every time. However, reducing damage to the owner’s property is also very high on the list. Confinement or restriction usually allows the best chance to do this. Most dogs will settle if they have a set area they are trained to be relaxed in. This may be a crate or particular room, should be a comfortable temperature and quiet – a gentle

radio may help, but a loud, noisy, roadside position won't.

Dogs should be encouraged to use this space regularly for sleep and feeding while the owner is present – it can become a safe den where the dog relaxes and feels comfortable. Safe toys can be left in this den also (**Figure 3**). However, some dogs will react badly to being confined and it will distress them more – these dogs may feel more relaxed being able to patrol and protect their homes until the owners return. The risk here is the den inadvertently becomes a departure cue and, therefore, a good counter-conditioning and habituation programme is absolutely essential in these cases.

## Medicine

Pharmacological intervention is sometimes necessary in severe cases of separation anxiety and it can be very useful alongside behavioural modification; however, this is a complex subject for veterinary surgeons and is outside the scope of this article.

## Complementary therapies

Numerous nutraceuticals are also available to help reduce less severe forms of stress and anxiety without the perceived side effects of prescription drugs. Some are used short-term for single events, while others can be longer term.

Pheromones can certainly be used to help promote “calmness” and aid in the training process. “The comforting message in Adaptil has been clinically proven to increase focus during training in puppies and adult dogs, and reduce stress, which can lead to inappropriate behaviours in our companion dogs” (Ceva, 2015).

Collars may be useful or plug-in diffusers can be used in the area where the dog resides and must be left on 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Owners must be made aware that, although they can help, they are not a magic cure-all and all separation issues can take many months to resolve.

## Nutrition

Diet can also have an effect on how a dog behaves and its stress levels. A diet too high in protein can deplete levels of tryptophan and, therefore, serotonin, but a diet rich in grains will also reduce serotonin. An ideal diet for an anxious dog is believed to be a good-quality food with a carbohydrate base of rice or potato (Bosch et al, 2007).

Commercial “calm” diets exist with added L-tryptophan and alpha-casozepine; a milk-derived bioactive peptide with anxiolytic effects. Obviously, it is also important to exercise the dog appropriately, as a tired dog will settle more easily, but mental stimulation must not be overlooked either and the use of puzzle feeders can help.



# Conclusion

Behaviour	Example	What does it achieve?
Destruction	Chewing, digging, damage to owner's possessions, targeting doors and windows	Attempts at escape to try to find the group
House soiling/ gastrointestinal signs	Urination and defecation despite previous outdoor elimination, vomiting or diarrhoea, inappetence	Sympathetic nervous system stress response to evacuate bowels/bladder to be able to exhibit the flight or fight response
Vocalisation	Whining, howling, barking (high-pitched vocalisation is associated with distress)	Identifies where the animal is so the rest of the group can respond and/or locate it
Motor activity	Pacing, circling, shaking, trembling. This may start before the owner leaves and continue throughout	The need to leave the area and remain with the group
Self-trauma	Injury to the animal from attempts to escape, acral lick granulomas	Unfortunate side effects of attempts to escape, compulsive redirection behaviour due to stress and an inability to cope with the confinement

**Table 1.** Common separation-related distress behaviours.

The nature of the social attachment of domestic dogs means ideally they should not be left at home alone for extended periods of time and the engagement of other family members, friends and neighbours, or the employment of a dog walker or dog sitter, is a good option with respect to a dog's overall welfare.

Separation anxiety is a complex subject with many causes and possible resolutions. The key to a successful outcome is understanding the cause, working with the owner and individual dog, and devising a programme that suits them both. It is a long process and the plan will need reviewing and modifying along the way, so good client communication is essential to support them.

Although these dogs usually avoid euthanasia for their problems, many of them still end up living a stressed life in rehoming centres, so if in doubt, do not be afraid to refer these cases to a specialist in dog behaviour.

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