



8 Steps to Treating Separation Anxiety

1) Never correct destruction or accidents after the fact - Sure she looks guilty when you walk in the door and the kitchen has been remodeled. But that doesn't mean she "knows" she shouldn't do it and is just doing it for spite. What she "knows" is that if you come home and there's a chair in toothpicks or puddles all over the carpet, you're going to launch into a dramatic display of anger. Her appeasing posture is designed to avert your wrath. So don't be fooled by her groveling and shrinking around – she's waving a white flag, so you don't shoot and it won't have the slightest impact on what she does the next day when you're gone.

2) Keep your comings and goings low-key - Don't emotionally overload your dog when you come and go. If you act like it's a major event, why shouldn't she? Teach your dog that you're coming and going is just no big deal by staying calm whenever you come and go. It's easy to emotionally overload our dogs when we come and go but it does them no good.

3) Begin a desensitization and counter conditioning procedure to teach your dog to feel good when you walk

OUT - This is the foundation of treatment. The key is to create situations where your dog feels happy when you leave, and to prevent her from being scared as the door closes. You'll notice that I said feel good "when you leave" not "while you're gone". Most dogs are in a panic by the time you've shut the door behind you, and many of them are terrified long before that. They've learned to associate your routine – putting on your coat, getting your keys, maybe even combing your hair – with your departure. Those events on their own can trigger fear before you get anywhere near the door. Your goal is to divide your departure and absence into tiny steps and gradually get your dog happy about each and every one of them.

A) Write down the "triggers" that cue your dog that you are leaving - Spend a few days getting very clear about exactly where in the leaving process your dog gets concerned. It's important that you find the "beginning", because you need to start before your dog gets nervous for treatment to work. The "triggers" are the events that initiate concern in your dog, the things you do that clue your dog in to your subsequent departure.

B) RANDOMLY desensitize the "triggers" - Five times each day, do one trigger at a time, without actually going anywhere. If putting on your coat is a trigger for your dog, then get your coat and ignore your dog completely. Do anything for a minute or two: watch TV, talk on the phone, balance your check book – do anything except leave the house. Then take you coat off and continue to ignore your dog.

Repeat this whenever you can. The idea is to teach your dog a new association – that coats, hairbrushes, don't mean much at all. I think it's important to use caution with this method however. Don't do this within an hour of leaving, or you might just sensitize your dog to be more anxious when you actually go.

C) Routinely counter condition the triggers - Most importantly, begin a program that teaches your dog a new association between your leaving cues and how he feels. Once you've identified the triggers, figure out what your dog adores that will keep him happy while you busy yourself with your keys or your coat. Most dogs respond best to food, stashed away in a hollow toy. The dog has to work to get the food out, so that his attention stays on the toy for a longer time than if you just tossed treats on the floor. And don't just use any old food. You have to get serious here, so find his favorite food in the whole world! Most dogs are attracted to smelly gushy stuff, so try peanut butter or Liverwurst in a "Kong" toy or Jerky treats smushed into a Sterile Beef Bone. ("Kongs" are the safest toy I know, although in my experience the boiled sterile beef bones seem to hold dogs' attention the longest).

Ready the tempting treat while your dog watches you and drools, then put it down and wait for him to become lost in extracting the food. Once he's fully engaged, perform a brief rendition of one of his triggers – lets just say the keys

Put down the Kong, wait till he's got his tongue stretched out of his head in the peanut butter, an then pick up your keys and put them down again. Then walk over and take away the Kong. "What?!" we hope he says. "Wait a minute, I was still working on that". Good, now put it down again and let him get busy with it and jingle your keys again. Put them down and then take away the toy. Repeat that a few more times, then take away the toy for good and go off and do something else.

What happened is that your dog heard the keys while feeling happy rather than feeling stressed. A few hours later, repeat this exercise, except this time pick up the keys and pick up your jacket. Then, take off your jacket, put down your keys, and take away the stuffed chew toy. "Drat", says Fido, "he's coming back again!" Repeat that four or five times in one session, and then take a well deserved break.

Every day, gradually add the steps of your actually leaving the house while your dog slurps on his desert. After a few days, if you're sure that your dog is now relaxed when he hears the keys, pick up the keys BEFORE you put down the Kong, then put on your jacket. This is the actual counter conditioning (keys first, Kong next) that will teach your dog to associate all your "leaving triggers" with feeling happy, or at least relaxed.

The speed with which you progress depends on the severity of the problem. Most serious cases of Separation Anxiety can be cured in about six to eight weeks, while milder ones can be improved in just a few weeks. *In most cases the critical part of the entire process is to get a dog comfortable with you leaving the house. If these dogs are fine while you walk out, then they're fine the rest of the day.

4) Find a way to leave your dog during your usual

absences where she's not anxious – "Uh hello?..." you might be thinking. "If I could do that, why would I be reading this?" Before you toss this through the window let me explain. If you're working every day to condition your dog to feel relaxed and comfortable during your "mini-departures", all your hard work will go out the window if you then follow the same routine and leave for eight hours. Counter conditioning works by gradually teaching her to associate each tiny step of your leaving with feeling good. It won't work if you then go backwards each day and overwhelm her with more than she can handle. So you need to find some way to leave your dog where she's comfortable when you're not playing the "conditioning game". That's the bad news. The good news is that

after guaffling or gulping, my clients always come up with a solution. So you can too. Here's a list of what has worked for others:

Drive your dog to a friend –

Find a dog sitter –

Doggy day care or boarding kennels -

Take your dog with you –

Leave your dog in another part of the house –

5) Will another dog help? – Sometimes, but think long and hard before you get a dog for your dog. I worry about people who get another dog when they really don't want one themselves. Two dogs can be more than twice the work of one. Having said that, there are cases where another dog (or cat) helps a great deal. This works especially well for dogs who are truly panicked about being alone, and take great comfort in the presence of another dog. Some dogs, however, are not so much anxious about being alone, but about being away from YOU, and another dog has no effect at all. Some of these dogs are even anxious if there's a human there who's not their owner, so another dog probably isn't going to help in those situations.

6) Teaching “Velcro” dogs to handle separation - If your dog isn't soothed by the presence of another person, or if he shadows you around the house obsessively, it can't hurt to teach him to be more comfortable when he's away from you. You can work on this when you're home by getting him used to being in another room of the house when you're home. The easiest way to do this is to give him some food that he has to work to get out. Try stuffing a “Kong” or giving him a “Buster Cube” and shutting the door between you. If possible, use a food that's not as good as what he gets when you are doing your conditioning exercises. In the first weeks, return to him and take the toy away before he's eaten all the food, then gradually let him stay there longer and longer.

7) Will corrections help? - If your dog has serious Separation Anxiety, forget about using a correction. It won't work, and it might make it worse. Honestly. OK, so you're mad. Try saying terrible things sweetly to your dog to help alleviate your anger *without* making your dog more anxious. Take your understandable anger about your formerly beautiful couch out on something it can't hurt, and then sit down and figure out how to prevent the same thing from happening again.

8) What about medications? - Some dogs are so terrified that their very health is at risk. In cases this severe, and if there's simply no alternative to leaving your dog alone, you might consider using adjunctive medical therapy along with counter conditioning. Clomicalm has been approved for use in veterinary medicine to assist in treatment of Separation Anxiety, and some owners have had success with similar medications that can help the dog over “the hump” until conditioning begins to kick in. Be sure that the medication you discuss with your veterinarian acts to decrease anxiety or panic, rather than simply to sedate your dog into a state of quiet depression. Insure that it is designed to ameliorate anxiety, not just slow down your dog's body. All medications have side effects, and some of them are serious, so don't even think about using medication unless your dog has a severe case. The research has found that a drug can help alleviate the symptoms of Separation Anxiety if used in conjunction with a conditioning program to

be effective in the long term. So don't think of drugs as an "easy" solution to your dog's problem, but rather as a tool to be used in conjunction with behavior modification programs.

Copyright 2000 by Patricia B. McConnell, Ph.D. from the book "I'll Be Home Soon!"

Adapted by Jeffrey Brian for Karma Dog Training