

# Tips for Dogs With Separation Anxiety

Those of us who share our lives with dogs know how amazing it is to be on the receiving end of the unconditional love they give us. Dogs are extremely social animals and, through the process of domestication, we humans have become their social group. Many dogs would rather be with their people than with their own species. But this intense need for our companionship can be problematic when the dog cannot handle being left alone when we go off to work or play.



By Kelley Bollen

Separation anxiety is a real disorder that some dogs experience when left alone. The symptoms can range from mild separation distress – when the dog gets upset when you leave but settles down and sleeps the whole time you are gone – to severe panic attacks the second you walk out the door. Dogs who have panic attacks can be destructive and even injure themselves as they attempt to escape the house in search of their people. This can be a serious problem for both the dog and the human family.

Severe cases of separation anxiety need a full-blown behavior modification program and often the addition of anti-anxiety medication. But if your dog exhibits milder signs of separation anxiety, there are some things you can do to help her learn to be OK when left home alone. These suggestions can also be helpful to safeguard against the development of separation anxiety, especially when you bring a new dog home.

The first suggestion is to give your dog some aerobic exercise before you leave him home alone. Exercise allows your dog to get rid of excess energy and, because of the endorphins that are released during aerobic exercise, also relieves stress. Taking your dog for a brisk walk or jog or tossing the ball in the yard for 15 minutes before you head out will do the trick. Or you can try my favorite exercise for cold winter days called “doggie stair-master” whereby you toss a toy or treat up a flight of stairs (providing they are not too slippery) so that your dog runs up to get the treat or toy and then you call him back down. Doing this 5-6 times will burn off a lot of energy for sure. As they say – a tired dog is a good dog.

Other suggestions include keeping your departures and your arrivals very low key. If you make a big deal about loving your dog right before you leave and right when you come home, you put a huge disparity between when you are home and when you are not. Essentially the alone time is sandwiched between two small bursts of attention. It’s also recommended that you leave the radio on for some company when she is home alone. I like to leave NPR on because they play classical music interspersed with people talking though the news of the day (don’t worry – they don’t understand English so won’t get stressed by our current political atmosphere). It’s also helpful to leave your dog with a special treat whenever you leave to pair something good with your departure. I suggest leaving a Kong or hollow marrowbone stuffed with some kind of food paste (peanut butter, liverwurst, wet dog food, etc.) that will keep her busy for a while after you leave.



These recommendations should become your routine, regardless of whether your dog has signs of separation anxiety or not, so that he learns that being home alone isn't all that bad. Remember, your dog is not barking all day or tearing up the sofa because he is a bad dog; he is doing these things because he is anxious about being away from you. Do not punish these behaviors because you will increase the anxiety. Just recognize that your dog loves you so much that it's hard to be away from you. How wonderful it is to have that kind of admiration from such an incredible being as a dog.

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