



Phoenix Advice

How to deal with separation anxiety in dogs

www.phoenixasso.com

This information was produced by Phoenix's recommended Canine Behaviour Specialist, [Polly-Anne Lloyd](#).

For more advice, or to contact Polly-Anne, please visit her website at <http://www.dog-shrink.com/>

What is Separation Anxiety?

Dogs with separation anxiety cannot bear to be parted from their owners or sometimes other dogs, and often exhibit problem behaviour when left alone.

Reasons for separation problems:

There are many reasons why dogs exhibit problem behaviour when left alone. For example, simple boredom may be a key factor or young dogs may not have learned that it is unacceptable to bark, dig or chew household items.

Others may behave in an unacceptable fashion because they cannot cope with being separated from their owners and become anxious.

What can happen?

No dog should be left alone for prolonged periods, but dogs with separation anxiety become anxious when left alone even for just a few minutes. Some may become destructive, others are noisy, and some may become so frantic that they can mess in the house.

Symptoms of separation anxiety

- Your dog follows you from room to room, unwilling to let you out of sight even for a moment
- A strong bond is often formed with just one person in the household to the exclusion of others
- Problem behaviour begins as soon as you leave. The first 15 minutes are the worst, during which time the dog becomes extremely upset. All the physical signs of fear

may be present – an increase in heart and breathing rate, panting, salivating, increased activity and, sometimes, a need to go to the toilet. The dog may try to follow you, scratching at doors, chewing at doorframes, scratching at carpets or jumping up at windowsills to look for a way out. Alternatively your dog may bark, whine or howl to try and persuade you to come back.

- After this frantic period, your dog may settle down to chew something that you have recently touched that still carries your scent. Dogs will often chew scented items into small pieces and curl up in the debris so that your dog forms a “barrier” of your scent around them for protection.

Which dogs are most likely to develop separation anxieties?

Adopted dogs seem to be especially prone to separation problems, particularly during the first few weeks in their new home. This is very often the case with dogs adopted from a shelter where they have been with other dogs and around people all the time, or where dogs have been re-homed several times. Your dog needs to view you as their new pack and learn to trust you. Don't expect everything to be fine from day one.

How to deal with the problem

Using a crate or indoor kennel can reduce accidents and other problems rooted in insecurity by providing a safe and welcome haven. Most dogs like cosy places, which is why you often see dogs resting under tables.

A dog cannot do damage unless you let that happen. Do not leave the dog in the crate until she has accepted it as her den. Feed her in there and make it comfortable. When she is happy with it (this may take several weeks) start shutting the door for short periods of time.

Gradually get your dog used to being left on her own. Put her in the crate with a chew toy, then go into another room for very short time (1 minute) and then longer periods.

Next, leave the house and come back in right away. Gradually make those trips longer and longer; vary the duration you're out. Your dog will be less anxious as she learns that when you leave, you do come back.

Practice this several times a day. Get her used to you going and coming back. Don't say goodbye or make a fuss when you get back in – just ignore her for a few minutes. This can take weeks of repetitions. Be patient.

If your pet becomes distressed, begins to bark, scratch at the door, or has chewed anything when you return, you have gone too fast - leave for a shorter period next time and progress more slowly.

Do not, on any account, punish, scold or be angry with your dog.

Throughout the day put on your coat and pick up your keys. Then take off your coat. You are aiming to reduce your dog's reaction to "going out signals".

Exercise your dog, with a walk and by playing games, well in advance of leaving so that your dog has time to settle down

Leave your dog somewhere where any damage done will be minimized. This can be in her crate and should be well away from electrical wires and valuables. It is important to leave your pet in the house, where they will feel most secure, rather than out in the garden.

Try a Kong TM (a rubber chew toy that lasts a long time, even with dedicated chewers). Smear the inside with something tasty and your dog will spend hours trying to lick it out. It is in the first few minutes that your dog feels most distressed so this helps distract him.

Wearing an old sweater or T-shirt before leaving and putting it in your dog's bed will sometimes help. You need to renew your scent on this garment each time you leave the house. Leaving it at the bottom of the dirty laundry basket will save you from re-wearing it.

Encouraging independence

Dogs with separation anxiety are often overly attached and dependent on "the pack". Try to encourage your dog to be more independent by not giving in to pestering for attention. Just ignore him, no eye contact, no talking. When he goes and lies down on his own, praise him in a calm manner.

At other times, call your dog to you and make as much fuss as you like.

Steadily build your dog's confidence by using only reward - based methods of training. Training and success makes the dog feel more secure. Make these sessions short and fun. Concentrate on sit and down stay, gradually increasing the time.

If there are other people in the household to whom the dog is less attached, let these people feed and look after the dog more, thus reducing her attachment to one person.

Why punishment makes it worse

It is natural for owners to be angry if they return to find damage to their home, mess in the house or annoyed neighbours. Sensing this anger, dogs show submission in an attempt to appease the owner and reduce any punishment they might otherwise be subjected to. Unfortunately, a submissive posture (ears flat, head lowered, crouching, tail between legs) is often misinterpreted by owners as guilt. They often say, "See, he knows he has done wrong."

Any punishment given on returning home is ineffective. Dogs associate punishment with what they are doing at the instant they are punished and so your dog will not associate the telling off with their actions before you came home, even if you take the animal over to the scene of the crime.

Punishment is not only ineffective, but it is also likely to make the problem worse. Now, in addition to being anxious about being left, the animal is also worried about the owner returning.

Anxious owners make anxious pets

Dogs very easily pick up on our emotions. If you are anxious (for whatever reason) your dog will sense this. As leader of the pack you are saying "there's something to be afraid of" and your dog will respond accordingly. Conversely, if you are calm and project a happy attitude your dog is more likely to be calm as well.

What to do when all else fails

Give it time. Too many people give up in the first few weeks of adopting a dog.

Seek professional advice from a dog behaviour specialist or your vet. It is normal to feel frustrated, helpless and sometimes angry. This is a common problem, talk to someone who can help.

You may want to consider getting another dog as company. Sometimes medication or pheromone collars can help – ask your vet.

About Phoenix

Phoenix Association is a registered French charity that exists with the sole aim of dealing with the sad plight of the ever-increasing number of animals in need in and around the Dordogne.

We take in abused and abandoned animals, nurturing them in our voluntary network of foster homes and then placing them in loving, permanent homes. We work with maximum care and attention with a small number of animals at a time.

Phoenix is not state-funded, so in order for us to continue our work, we rely upon donations to fund our veterinary, fostering and re-homing costs. Every donation that we receive, however large or small, goes towards helping animals in desperate need.

Please visit our website to find out more about our animals available for adoption, foster caring, how to donate, how to join as a Member, and much more.

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