

Separation Anxiety: Understanding the "Panic Attack"

Separation Anxiety is one of the most misunderstood canine behaviors. A dog with separation anxiety is not being spiteful, "bad," or destructive on purpose—they are experiencing a **physiological panic attack**.

When left alone, these dogs enter a state of fight-or-flight. Using punishment or "tough love" only adds more fear to an already terrified dog and can significantly worsen the condition.

Is It Separation Anxiety?

Signs typically occur within the first **5 to 30 minutes** of your departure:

- **Destruction concentrated at exit points** (scratching at doors, chewing windowsills).
- **Vocalizing** (persistent howling, barking, or whining).
- **Elimination** (urination or defecation in an otherwise house-trained dog).
- **Physiological signs:** Excessive drooling, dilated pupils, heavy panting, or refusing high-value treats when left.

It might NOT be separation anxiety if: The behavior is due to boredom or lack of house training. If your dog chews a random shoe in the middle of the kitchen but is otherwise calm, it is likely boredom, not anxiety.

Setting Up for Success: The Assessment

Before you begin training, you need to find your dog's **threshold**—the exact moment they start to feel worried.

1. **Set up a Camera:** Use a laptop or phone with Zoom or Facetime, or a dedicated pet cam (like Furbo or Wyze).
2. **The Observation:** Step outside and watch the feed. Note the exact time your dog begins to show "micro-signs" of stress (pacing, yawning, staring at the door, or lip licking).

3. **Return Immediately:** The moment you see stress, go back inside. The goal of separation anxiety training is to **never** let the dog reach a state of panic.
-

Step-by-Step Treatment Strategy

1. Gradual Desensitization

This is the "gold standard" for separation anxiety. You must slowly build up the time you are away, starting with durations so short they don't trigger a reaction (even if that is only 2 seconds).

- **Training Absences:** Practice stepping out the door and coming right back in. Repeat this until your dog is bored by your departure.
- **Incrementally Increase:** Go from 5 seconds to 10 seconds, then 30 seconds. If the dog panics at 1 minute, go back to 30 seconds and build up more slowly.

2. Managing Pre-Departure Cues

Dogs are masters of pattern recognition. They know you're leaving before you even touch the doorknob.

- **Identify Triggers:** Picking up keys, putting on shoes, or applying makeup.
- **Neutralize the Cues:** Put on your shoes and then sit on the couch to watch TV. Pick up your keys and then go into the kitchen to make tea. Do these things throughout the day *without* leaving so the cues lose their meaning.

3. Rethink the Crate

For some dogs, a crate is a safe haven. For a dog with separation anxiety, it can be a "prison" that triggers **confinement anxiety**. If your dog is injuring themselves trying to escape a crate (broken teeth, bloody paws), stop using it immediately and consult a professional about using a "dog-proofed" room instead.

Debunking the Myths

Separation anxiety is **not** caused by:

- Letting your dog sleep in your bed.
- A "lack of leadership" or "alpha" status.

- Spoiling your dog with love and treats.
- Failing to do basic obedience training.

Professional Support

Treatment for separation anxiety can be a long road. You do not have to do it alone.

- **Veterinary Intervention:** Many dogs require anti-anxiety medication (like fluoxetine or trazodone) to "lower the floor" of their anxiety so they can actually learn during training sessions.
- **Certified Specialists:** Look for a **CSAT (Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer)**. These professionals specialize exclusively in this complex behavior.
- Resources: Go to malenademartini.com for expert separation anxiety advice.