



Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is different than a dog that has a proclivity to destroy a house because you are not there. If your dog is simply a destructive animal because of dominance issues, you will need to establish yourself as his leader and be sure he understands your role whether you are there or not. Separation anxiety is a mental fear and condition that dogs suffer from. If not corrected this behavior can become damaging to the dog very quickly.

The most common reason dogs experience separation anxiety is because of poor structure on the part of the human. I've made many of the mistakes and have first hand knowledge of dealing with separation anxiety in my personal dog, and solving the problem.

To understand the reason for separation anxiety, we first need to understand how dogs think. Dogs are pack animals and thrive on pack structure. If the leader of the pack leaves the pack, the rest of the pack understands that he will return. That is hardwired into him from birth. Until something upsets this hardwired instinct the dog is fine. The pack does not cry when he leaves and then destroys the den. In nature the pack is set up and structured in a way that dogs understand based on their instincts. However, when humans get a dog, they try to change the instinct in the dog and create something that does not exist in the brain / instinct of the dog.

An important aspect of understanding why dogs suffer from separation anxiety is because of the instinctual fear that is created by the events leading up to the actual separation. For the most part, but there are exceptions, people whose dog freaks out when they leave do so for a couple of reasons:

1. They have been left alone for long periods of time in spaces that are either too large, too small or ones that the dog is altogether unfamiliar with.
2. The dog has been coddled day and night, and when the human leaves, the dog does not understand ***what he did wrong*** to justify being left alone
3. The dog has been "***punished***" by being put in a room, crate or yard... and that is the same place they are put into when the human leaves.
4. Upon leaving the human will baby talk and kiss the dog, stroking his head and "***explaining***" to him "***I will return, I promise.***"
5. Upon returning the human fusses over the dog and makes the dog feel that the time he spent away was a big deal.

Many people believe in confining dogs when they go out. This is something you should investigate for yourself, and if your dog exhibits destructive behavior when you are out, it might be something I would recommend to prevent the dog from damaging your house or injuring himself. However, and this is the big part, do NOT put your dog in a crate when you go out and leave him there, only to release him when you return. The dog will see this as a punishment. If you will use a crate, accustom the dog to the crate, while you are there and see to it that the dog understands that the crate is a safe place, not a place of punishment. If you are using a room to leave the dog in, spend some time in that room with the dog. Make whatever place you will leave him in a place of comfort, structure and safety. The way to do this is to get the dog used to being in that place while you are home, offering him rewards and praise while there. The more often a dog is in the crate, or the room he will be confined in, the more “*safe*” he will feel in there when you are gone.

Dogs are pack animals but are also very independent. Dogs generally don't like to be coddled, picked up, kissed, or babied. They accept this behavior eventually, however it breaks down their inner strength. I'm not saying not to love your dog, I'm saying to structure it and combine it with training that will allow your dogs natural instincts to thrive. Be certain that your dog can be alone in a room with you in another room. You can start training this by leaving him in one room when you go into the bathroom or maybe run outside for a few minutes. When you leave him, don't say anything, just disappear – and then reappear. Also, do not make a big deal when you come back. If you don't make a big deal that you were gone, the dog won't see it as a big deal. I'll talk more about that below.

The overall structure you give your dog will determine how well he will act when he is alone. Dogs that are needy and insecure generally do not fare well when left alone. They become destructive, either outwardly on objects, themselves or inwardly and break down mentally. If your dog exhibits signs of separation anxiety, you will have to get him used to you leaving slowly. The key to this exercise will be leaving and returning quickly. doing this over and over and staggering the amount of time you spend away will strengthen his faith that you will be back. This also means varying the times in no specific manner. ***Leave for 5 minutes, then 1 minute, then 10 minutes, then 6 minutes, and so on.*** When leaving, do not say anything to your dog, do not pet him do not even look toward him. If you don't make it a big deal, he will learn that it is not a big deal. When you return, again, do not make it a big deal. Come into the room, do something, and then greet your dog. If your dog jumps on you or comes running toward you, do nothing. Do not yell or talk to him... ***WAIT***. He will need to learn that you are in charge and everything is ok whether you are there or not. If you walk in and fuss over him, he will associate the positive of your return with the negative of your leaving. He needs to feel your presence in his surroundings whether you are there or not. There are plenty of smells and things in his immediate surrounding area to remind him of you. When you greet your dog upon returning, do so casually and aloofly. Move on to continue your daily life.

- *Some of these things may seem difficult for you, or unfair to your dog. It's important to think about the difference in human and canine behavior and understanding. You must learn to think like a dog and understand his needs to help him. Placing your human emotions on his will NOT help him in any way.*

Another great solution in leaving a dog alone that has some issues with separation anxiety is to leave things there that make him comfortable. This can be in the lines of a radio playing, a TV on, or some toys to occupy him. A good thing to note is that if he has these same toys all the time, they probably aren't that special to him when you are gone. I have several toys that I use when I leave, and believe me; they are special to my dog. They all involve little treats that are hidden away inside of the toy. And, even though my dog is not a food driven dog, he is happy because the toys make him work to get the treats. There are many good toys that you will find that let you stuff treats inside of them that the dog will need to work on to get the treats out. I use all natural treats including frozen meatballs stuffed into a rubber bone with holes in it. When these toys go down, loaded with treats, my dog is happy and doesn't mind me leaving... I don't think he knows ☺

- *The key in curing separation anxiety is the break the cycle of your leaving to you being gone. This is an important aspect for your dog. The thing that drives most dogs is the act of you leaving. They see this behavior as the abandonment phase, and it is what drives them to becoming destructive. The act of you leaving is played over and over again-- more so than the fact of them being left alone. Occupying the dogs' time during that phase and replacing that behavior with something rewarding and positive makes all the difference to most dogs. If your leaving means comfort and reward, this will calm him down. After he's done with the treat and playing, he will settle down. When you return, there is no great big deal made so everything is as normal.*

- Please choose your toys carefully. Some dog toys can prove dangerous if broken or swallowed. Also if toys become worn out they should be replaced.
- Bones can splinter if your dog is an aggressive chewer.
- NEVER give your dog cooked bones

Err on the side of caution. Rawhide chews and cheap toys are not the answer. Think about durable toys that will occupy him for a good long time. Frozen meat stuffed inside of a toy will keep him busy and keep his mind pre-occupied.

Please visit my animal rescue organization and consider supporting our important work:
<http://www.boundangels.org>

All writings are ©2009 Robert Cabral – not to be reproduced without permission
www.blackbeltdogtraining.com