

Mitigating Separation Related Behaviors When You're Home Frequently Now, But Won't Always Be

Separation-related behaviors and problems are a collection of behaviors that dogs perform because some part of the process of being home alone creates physical and physiological distress. This may be frustration, fear or panic. It can result in a myriad of behavioral outputs ranging from vocalization (barking, crying and whining), pacing, destruction, elimination (urinating, defecating), drooling, or being shut down.

These are independent of who the dog lives with, their overall training status or their inclusion in activities deemed 'spoiling' (being allowed on the couch, people food, sleeping in your bed, etc.) They are a behavior pathology and are not retaliatory or spiteful.

With many people home more frequently during certain periods of the year (such as between Christmas and New Year's Day) or in pandemic restrictions, it is important to discuss separation related issues.

My dog already has separation-related issues. What can I do to help my dog adjust?

If your dog already has separation related problems, change in departure routines can make it worse. Working away from home more or less, or leaving at different times can be sufficient to make separation-related problems worse. Here are some suggestions to help decrease separation-related behaviors.

- Practice leaving your dog alone for some periods of the day every day. Keeping to a departure time close to what your work schedule was can be helpful, even though you're unlikely to be gone for as long.
- Start small with short departures, e.g. 20 minutes to go to the grocery store. If your dog already has a departure pattern, continue to use all features of it, including any medications or supplements provided by your veterinarian.
- Video your dog for these departures. Nanny cams work great for live time spying on your pup. You should not speak to your dog (clinically we have not seen this improve a pet's separation anxiety and have seen many dogs become distressed by it). Watch for signs that your dog is stressed (see below).
- If your work schedule is likely to change after a period of time at home, slowly move your practice departures from your current time to the new time while you are home. A good rule of thumb is 5 to 15 minutes of change in time every three departures, provided there are no signs of stress.

For example, if you used to leave the house at 7:30 but will be changing to a 9:30 departure, incremental adjustments in your practice departures would be;

- Depart at 7:40 for three days,
- Depart at 7:50 for three days,
- Depart at 8:00 for three days, etc., rather than jumping directly from 7:30 to 9:30.

Signs that your dog is stressed

- Stiff body
- Freezing
- Cowering
- Trembling
- Yawning
- Lip-licking
- Pacing
- Urination, Defecation
- Holding one leg up
- Drooling, panting (when not hot)
- Pupil dilation (black eyes)
- Whale eye (seeing the whites of the eyes)
- Wet dog shake (when not wet)
- Inability to eat treats while you're gone.

If any of these signs are observed, please discuss with your veterinarian.

What if my dog doesn't have separation-related problems?

Unless you've video spied on your dog, you can't be sure your dog doesn't have mild concerns (pacing, panting) that do not leave obvious indicators of distress (destruction, elimination or escaping).

It's best to be proactive. Video your dog during your next set of errands and continue to occasionally leave your dog home alone so they do not become accustomed to you being home 24/7.

