

Isolation/Separation/Crate Anxiety in Dogs

Separation anxiety is one of the most common behavioral issues dogs can have. Rescued dogs are especially susceptible to developing separation anxiety due to the many household changes and losing their “pack” from their original owner, then the shelter, then the foster. They think that when you leave, you’re not coming back to them and they will be losing their pack again. Separation anxiety is one of the most difficult behavioral issues to truly cure.

What is Separation Anxiety?

Dogs are not meant to be alone. They are pack animals and are very social. Unfortunately, in today’s world, dogs are housepets that are expected to be alone for long hours during the day while their human pack is at work or school. A dog with separation anxiety panics when they are separated from their pack or the person they are bonded with. Isolation anxiety is similar, except it is triggered by being alone, rather than being away from their specific person or people. Dogs with isolation anxiety are usually fine if they are around any people, or sometimes around other dogs with people absent.

Symptoms of Isolation/Separation Anxiety

Symptoms of general anxiety include:

- Excessive panting
- Seeing the whites of the eyes
- Cowering
- Pacing
- Frequent yawning
- Tense muscles, especially facial muscles
- Looking at thing sideways
- Cowering
- Tail tucking
- Hypervigilance
- Noise sensitivity
- Refusal to take food
- Shaking
- Attempting to flee/hide

Symptoms Specific to Isolation/Separation/Crate Anxiety (Only occurs when separated from people or left alone):

- Barking, whining, howling
- Destroying objects in their environment (may also be caused by boredom)
- Breaking out of crates

- Damage to house, especially around doors or windows (dog is trying to get out to find you)
- Constant panting
- Not touching food/treats
- Self mutilation/self injury
- Improper pottyng

Dogs with isolation/separation anxiety truly think that they cannot survive if they are left alone or away from their pack. The behaviors/symptoms involved are part of a panic response and should NOT be punished!!!

Triggers of Isolation/Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety can develop or worsen throughout an animal's life. There are many things that can trigger this anxiety:

- Changes in family structure. This could include adding a member of the family (new baby, someone moving in) or someone leaving (kid off to college, divorce, etc)
- Changes in primary care provider. Someone new taking care of the dog instead of their usual bonded caregiver.
- Changes in home environment. For example: moving, major redecorating, etc.
- Temporary changes in place. For example, being watched or boarded while family goes out of town.
- Changes in diet or gut imbalance. Studies have suggested that the gut biome (made up of beneficial bacteria) can influence anxiety. Antibiotics or lack of probiotics in the diet may influence the gut biome!
- Medical issues. An imbalance in brain chemistry, neurotransmitters, or hormones, especially serotonin, can cause separation anxiety.

Behavioral Rehabilitation for Separation/Isolation/Crate Anxiety

The main reason that this type of anxiety is the most difficult to truly cure is that, as with any training, having a major negative experience sets the rehabilitation process back. With dogs with these anxieties, being left alone at ALL during the critical beginning stages of training will end up being a major negative experience to the dog, setting training back. However, leaving the dog alone is often unavoidable due to work, school, etc. In addition, being alone is never something a dog with separation anxiety will just "get used to". These anxieties RARELY, if ever, go away on their own.

Rehabilitation Training should start during a time when you know you will be able to be home for an extended period of time. Days to weeks is better. A weekend is a good start if that is all you can do, but a staycation would probably be the best bet. The following training should be done in the order it is presented. This is a major rehabilitation. It is not like teaching a dog to sit. You cant just practice for 5 minutes once a week and expect results. This is something that should be

practiced for at least one 1 hour session EVERY day.

Seeing to the Dog's Needs.

Anxiety occurs when there is an imbalance in the dog. Whether it is an imbalance caused by a troubled past, a medical issue, or lack of mental, or physical stimulation, providing the dog with a fulfilling lifestyle and a proper diet can help reduce the symptoms.

1. **Physical Exercise.** Dogs that have excess energy use that energy to fuel their anxiety and the negative symptoms of it. Make sure your dog gets ample exercise so that the frustration of needing exercise doesn't cause the escalation of the panic. I recommend at least 1--2 miles of STRUCTURED exercise at a trotting pace immediately before leaving the dog alone, depending on the size of the dog. A treadmill is a great tool for this, and a tired dog is more likely to nap while you're gone.

2. **Mental Exercise/Stimulation.** Dogs are intelligent creatures. Just like people, dogs can overthink their situation. People have all sorts of outlets for their busy brains: work, school, computer games, television, crossword puzzles, etc. Dogs only have us and what is around the home. Providing your dog with adequate mental stimulation can help them to be able to think about their situation and realize that being alone isn't the end of the world. Puzzle food toys, scent tracking games, obedience training, and going to busy places to meet lots of people are all very mentally exhausting for dogs. There are a ton of cheap/free DIY food puzzle games. Just google DIY Dog food puzzle games!

3. **A Good Diet.** This cannot be stressed enough. Research shows there IS a connection between digestive systems and issues like anxiety. You know how when you get nervous, your stomach tends to get butterflies or nauseous feeling? That works both ways and a healthy gut can help improve anxiety disorders. A good, high quality food with no fillers and a probiotic supplement can make a difference!

4. **Patience.** This is one of the most important things you can provide your dog. Rehabilitation for Anxiety is a long road, and progress is usually slow. Dogs are not rational creatures, and you cant just tell them, "Hey, I'll be back in an hour!" They also don't have much concept of time. You know how they are always super happy to see you, even if you have only been gone 5 minutes? **THERE IS NO QUICK FIX FOR SEPARATION ANXIETY!**

Crate Habituation

I always recommend using a crate with a dog that has separation anxiety. This way you know they are contained and safe and not destroying your door or windows or furniture. However, if the dog has severe confinement anxiety (not just crate aversion!), leaving them free is an option as well. In that case, skip the section on Crate Habituation and go right to Separation Habituation.

A crate should represent the dog's den. A place that is all their own, where they can feel cozy and snug and where they can sleep without being bothered. A crate should NEVER be used as a punishment, though it can be used for confinement. Many rescue dogs have had bad experiences being confined and will require extra patience during this phase. It is best to have two crates to start with: one that you can put the dog in while you are gone for the duration of the training, and one that you are making into a wonderful, comfortable den. If you try to confine the dog in the "good" crate while he is still having panic attacks while you are gone, it won't be a good place for very long and will make the training that much harder.

Make sure the crate is set in a quiet location where they will still feel like a part of the goings on. The crate should be covered, either a plastic airliner type or a wire crate covered in blankets. Plastic crates generally work better for dogs that will destroy the bedding and there are no bars for them to chew on and potentially injure their teeth or mouth. Make sure it is sturdy enough for your dog's size and power, they can easily hurt themselves if they damage the crate during a panic episode. Fill it with comfy blankets (or a rubber mat they can't reach if they are destructive). It should be big enough for them to comfortably turn around and lay down, but no bigger. Anything bigger does not give them the cozy den feeling and will not trigger the denning/nesting instinct.

Crate habituation training takes different amounts of time for different dogs. Some dogs pass step 11 in days, while others may take weeks or months. Make sure you are patient and try not to get frustrated. The dog will sense your frustration and that will just increase his anxiety and the training session will fail. If you notice yourself getting frustrated, stop the training and try again later when you are feeling calmer. Training sessions should be no longer than 1 hour without a break. 1 hour tends to be the limit for the dog brain to make learning progress. Any longer than that, they will get burned out and learning will stop. Keep an eye on your dog. If he stops showing interest in the food reward or the praise, stop the session and try again later.

Crate habituation training should proceed as follows:

1. Bring the dog to the "Good" crate with a handful of small (pea sized) HIGH VALUE treats (lunchmeat, freshpet vital, hotdogs, freeze dried liver, etc, whatever is the dog's FAVORITE). Toss a few treats in the crate and let the dog go in the crate to get the treats. If the dog won't go in, put them right by the entrance and reward the dog for going over by the entrance. Once the dog is entering the crate on their own, proceed to Step 2.
2. Start moving the door to the closed position (but do not close it) once the dog is in the crate. Every time the crate door closes behind them, say "Yay! Good dog!" or whatever you use to praise your dog and give them a treat. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, move on to step 3.
3. Close the crate door behind the dog for 1 second, then open it again and

praise and reward the dog with a treat. Practice this 10--20 times. Once your dog is comfortable with this step, move on to step 4.

4. Close the crate door behind the dog for 5 seconds, take one step away, step towards, then open it again and praise and reward the dog with a treat. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, move on to step 5. **It is important not to make a big deal when you are moving away from the dog. This includes saying goodbye, or feeling anxious leaving your dog behind. Pretend that moving away from the dog is just another task that needs to be done before you leave, like turning off the lights and making sure the windows are closed. You leaving should never be made into an exciting or anxious event!**

5. Close the crate door behind the dog for 30 seconds, take two steps away, steps towards, then open it again and praise and reward the dog with a treat. Practice this 10--20 times. Once your dog is comfortable with this step, move on to step 6.

6. Take a break! Learning is tiring for dogs, and with all of these treats, your dog might not be as motivated anymore to work for the food. Take 10--15 minutes away from practicing so your dog can reset himself.

7. Do step 5 again. If the dog seems uncomfortable with this after the break, backtrack to step 4. If the dog seems comfortable, go on to step 8.

8. Close the crate door behind the dog for 5 minutes, take 3--5 steps away, steps towards, then open it again and praise and reward the dog with a treat. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, move on to step 9.

9. Take a break! Go play outside, or get some other work done and let your dog relax. While the dog is occupied, throw some treats into the crate so that he can get rewarded for going in on his own while you are doing other things.

10. Repeat step 8. If your dog is comfortable with this, increase the difficulty by adding time and/or distance, rewarding every time you return. From this point on, it is best to add only one new thing at a time. Go back down a step or two if the dog starts showing anxiety. It is important to remember not to rush this phase if you want your dog to be comfortable and happy in his crate while you are gone! The crate/den needs to be a place where GOOD things happen!

11. Gradually increase the time and distance until your dog can be comfortable being in a different room than you for an extended period of time (30+ minutes). A baby monitor/camera can help you determine if he is indeed comfortable, or if he is just quietly whining and panting. Both of those are signs of anxiety and training should backtrack if these are seen until the dog is truly comfortable. Once your dog is comfortable being crated in a different room, you can start on the Separation Habituation Training.

Separation Habituation Training

Dogs are very socially sensitive animals. This is why they can do such amazing tasks like alert an owner when they are about to have a seizure or a diabetic crisis. However, this works against them too, especially for dogs that have Isolation or Separation Anxiety. They easily pick up on the small, subtle signs that you are preparing to leave them. This includes obvious things like grabbing your keys, warming up the car, opening the garage door, and putting your shoes or coat on. It can also include **subtler** things, the first signs in your routine that you will be leaving for work. Putting on makeup, wearing a suit or work uniform, or even checking to be sure the windows are closed. Your dog will be so in tune to your routine, that they will quickly learn that these things mean you will be leaving them and they will start to show subtle signs of anxiety when you perform them.

Separation Habituation training is a very slow process. It can take weeks to months to make substantial progress. Just like with Crate Habituation Training, don

Separation Habituation Training should proceed as follows:

1. Make your **subtle** leaving routine your every day routine. Even if you're off of work, dress and prepare for it like normal. Eventually your dog will stop associating those tasks with you going to work.
2. Reward your dog with treats and praise whenever they are being CALM during your normal routine. Do NOT reward the dog when he is showing signs of anxiety, as this just rewards the anxiety, it does not comfort the dog.
3. When the dog is comfortable with your **subtle** routine, place the dog in the crate in the same room as you and start with the obvious routine. Put shoes on. If the dog remains calm, take your shoes off, and reward the dog with a treat and praise. If the dog shows signs of anxiety, ignore the dog, and sit calmly with your shoes on until the anxiety goes away. Once the dog has been calm for a couple of minutes, take your shoes off and praise/reward the dog. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, move to step 4.
4. Same as step 3, but put your shoes on and then grab your keys/purse as well. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, move on to step 5.
5. Take a break! Let the dog out and play with him, allow him to shake off the experience. Whether he showed it or not, that was hard for him to deal with, and the next steps make it a lot harder.
6. Same as steps 3 and 4, except now you will go to the door you usually leave through. Open the door, and then close it right away. Stay at the door until your dog is calm, then return to him and praise, reward! Your dog will now start associating being calm during the door noise to you returning to him and rewarding him. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with you opening and closing the door, you can move on to step 7.

7. Same as step 6, except this time you are going to step outside with the door open. Once the dog is calm, go back inside and close the door, then return to the dog and praise and reward him! Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, proceed to step 8.

8. Same as step 7, except this time you will close the door behind you, then immediately open it again. Wait outside with the door open until your dog is calm, then return to him and praise and reward him Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, proceed to step 9.

9. Same as step 8, but you will keep the door closed behind you for a longer duration. Start with 5 seconds, and increase as the dog's comfort allows. Remember not to make a big deal out of leaving, but DO make a big deal out of returning and have a mini party every time you return to your crated dog during training. Dogs with separation anxiety think you are leaving them to be alone forever, which is a terrible fate for a social pack animal like a dog. They need to realize that even if you are gone, you ARE going to come back to them. This step takes the longest to progress past.

10. Once your dog is comfortable with you being gone for 5 minutes, add in starting the car. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, proceed to step 11. Remember to return to your dog and reward/praise him every time!

11. Get in your car and drive to the end of the driveway. Seems weird, but the dog will be able to hear the car shifting gears and this can trigger anxiety behaviors that may not occur with the car just starting and running. Practice 10--20 times per session. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, proceed to step 12. Remember to return to your dog and reward/praise him every time!

12. This time, drive around the block. Video tape the dog while you're gone to see how they react to the sound of the car driving away. If they seem comfortable, then practice 10--20 times per session. If they show symptoms of anxiety, go back to step 11 and practice that some more. Once the dog is fully comfortable with this step, proceed to step 13. Remember to return to your dog and reward/praise him every time!

13. Leave the dog alone for 10 minutes. Go grab lunch or go grocery shopping. Video tape your dog while you are gone to see how they react to being alone. 10 minutes alone tends to be a good point to determine how well your dog is reacting the entire time you are gone for work. Usually, if a dog is calm for the first 10 minutes, they will remain calm.

14. Even though 10 minutes is a good point to determine how comfortable your dog will be alone all day, it is a good idea to practice leaving the dog alone for periods longer than 10 minutes but shorter than 8 hours. Practice leaving the dog alone for 30 minutes to an hour (go grab yourself lunch or dinner, you earned it!) every day that you don't work so that they stay used to you leaving them.

Enrichment While You are Gone

Providing mentally stimulating enrichment while you are gone can help your dog keep his mind off the fact that he is alone. Toys like Kongs stuffed with Peanut Butter (NOT sweetened with Xylitol) or yogurt and frozen will keep him busy for a while. There are also a lot of toys out there also that you can put food/treats in and they have to roll them around to get the treats out. You can make your own out of PVC pipe with a hole drilled in it. There are also a ton of cool gadgets that allow you to interact with your dog through your smartphone. Some have laser toys, some allow you to talk to your dog or have a video chat. These tools can help the dog not feel so alone while you are gone, though they do tend to be pricey. Some dogs take comfort in the sound of a radio or television set on.

What To Do When Training Fails

If you have been practicing the Separation Habituation Training for a few months and not noticing any progress, there might be some circumstances that are causing the failure. Either you don't have enough time between work periods to make significant progress in the training without setting yourself back too far, or there is a real medical concern. However, the biggest reason for failure is that people aren't putting enough time into the training. Again, this is a major rehabilitation. It takes time and dedication.

There ARE medications that can help. Specific Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI's) are generally agreed to be the most effective medications for separation anxiety and include medicines such as Prozac (human drug). These need to be prescribed by a licensed Veterinarian. However, most vets haven't been trained on dosing procedures for medications like these. It is better to go through a Veterinary Behaviorist. These are veterinarians that focused their learning similarly to how a psychiatrist or psychologist would for people. They will do tests to determine any hormonal imbalances and prescribe the proper dosage of the correct medication as well as behavior modification training. These medications are very expensive, can take 4--6 weeks to start working, and do have side effects of their own.

Medication on its own will generally not be very effective. It should be combined with Behavioral Rehabilitation Training as listed above for best results.

Once the dog's anxiety appears to be gone, the dog should then be weaned off of the medication. Long term use of medication is generally not recommended. Because of this, it is important to try it without medication first, and then discuss with the Veterinary Behaviorist before you make a decision to be sure it is right for your dog.