

# SEPARATION ANXIETY

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When Daisy was still a puppy, we moved from urban New Jersey to suburban Florida. She was my first dog as an adult and at the time, I was still very much learning about living with and training dogs. When we left Daisy to run an errand, she could not be part of, go to dinner, or visit friends without her, we would just leave. That was it. We did not say “good bye” or tell her we would see her later, we just walked out the door. That had worked just fine in our house in New Jersey but it was not working in Florida.

Moving house is one of the top three stressors in life. For human beings who contemplate, plan, and execute a move, the stress is a major one. For pets who get no say in the matter, there is also major stress. Maybe it was the move, maybe it was the new and unfamiliar space, maybe it was her age. Daisy would not make any noise, she didn’t bark or whine. What she did do was scratch at the door frame. So vigorously did she scratch alongside that point of exit, that the paint came off. While I had no name for this behavior at this point, I did know that she was clearly upset by us leaving her behind.

I told this story to an uncle-in-law who had dogs. “Did you tell her goodbye?” he asked me. No, I did not, I was so busy with everything else going on, it just had not occurred to me. After all, dogs cannot go everywhere with their family in a new environment, no matter how much they would like to. Or how much we would like to bring them with us. I just made sure to lock the door and left. No goodbye.

After that conversation, from then on, I did just that. When we were leaving, I told Daisy goodbye. I also told her that I would see her later and to be a good girl. Sometimes, I would add that she should watch the house, as that was her only job. Why it worked I cannot say but it did.

This is not to say she was thrilled with our leaving, even with saying goodbye, it was plain to see that Daisy was not happy when we left her behind. It showed, she would retreat to her bed or the sofa, exhale with a woosh, and lower her head and watch us leave. But she did stop scratching at the door and when we came home, she was thrilled to see us. I would ask her to get a favorite toy to channel all that exuberance.

Targeting a door, or a point of exit, to get out like Daisy was doing, is one of the signs of separation anxiety or separation related problems. “Separation Anxiety” in dogs, is characterized by behaviors indicating severe distress when apart from an owner or other a

dog is attached to. Second to aggression, Separation Anxiety is one of the most common issues owners list when seeking professional help or rehoming dogs. While we know, separation anxiety affected a good number of dogs pre-pandemic, it will no doubt affect an even greater number, post pandemic, as more dogs who have never been home alone or have grown accustomed to continual owner presence, end up there.

This anxiety disorder is additionally known as “Separation Related Problems” depending on what behaviors are presenting. This suite or set of behaviors is typified by reactions that include excessive vocalizations, destructiveness (especially at points of egress such as doors, window frames, crate doors and walls), rearranging objects, inappropriate elimination, depression, restlessness, self-mutilation and more. As such behaviors are mostly happening when a care giver is not home, not seeing evidence that they have occurred, does not rule out the dog that suffers in shut down silence. We also do not know the extent to which separation anxiety may affect cats who may be experiencing the same anxiety but not displaying signs we are aware of.

Research notes apartment dwellers are more likely to report this problem, possibly due to neighbor proximity alerting them to an event a more distant homeowner may not be made aware of. My applied work in animal behavior modification is mostly in New York City, while I do also work in the surrounding metropolitan area, most of my separation anxiety clients are in the city.

Researchers, Lenkei, Gomez, et al. (2018) note that frustration versus fear and or anxiety, may be the most overriding emotional state for the dog experiencing separation anxiety. What is so important to remember here, is that separation anxiety points to extreme anguish in the emotional state of the animal. Dogs are highly social animals, and being deprived of attachment figures can evoke an extreme response. Frustrated, fearful or anxious, these dogs are absolutely beside themselves and much of what we see in their behavior is how they are coping with their overwhelming panic and anxiety over being left alone.

Classic approaches to treating separation anxiety in the literature, are limiting owner absence, removing punishment and behavior modification with counter conditioning (creating good associations with the bad thing) and desensitization (increasing exposure through minimal increases in duration or decreasing distance to the bad thing) while under threshold (the amount of time with or next to the bad thing which is not stressful or not so bad).

The challenge with working with separation anxiety, aside from not leaving the dog alone, which in itself can be a monumental one, considering just how very many “no dogs” places there are, is timing the formation of positive associations close enough to threshold (in this case, the point where being left alone or knowing they will be left alone evokes a phobic reaction) and not exceeding threshold in duration.

How close to the scary event of leaving can you go, to make the prospect of what is coming up not so scary? At what point when the dog has picked up on your imminent departure, is it too late for them to be comfortable enough, to still take a treat, or chase a ball, or be past threshold?

When anxiety does takes over, the brain is flooded with stress chemicals and learning or relaxation is not possible. Periods of time left alone in the desensitizing process must be measured in each scenario for the individual and counter conditioning must occur with the dog under threshold so that anxiety cannot take over in either phase. This means when to

offer reinforcers and desensitizing periods can be counted in seconds and minutes depending on the dog. It also means that there is no small a period kept under threshold that is not a big enough accomplishment to build on.

In scenarios where these routines and behaviors are believed to be motivated more by frustration, some researchers place responsibility for this behavior more squarely on the dog's owner rather than a dog's nature. Lenkei, Gomez, et al., writing about the role of frustration in separation related behaviors with the "lenient owner", the owner's "permissive and inconsistent behavior" and the "dog's demanding behavior", found barking to be more indicative than whining, adding additional emphasis needs to be placed on the role of routine, schedule and training to modify behavior. Leaving off the pejorative characterizations, it is agreed that such a fix applies to all companion dogs, especially the anxious ones. There is a tremendous burden in anxiety, and no doubt a frustrating one, to have to constantly demand attention, meals, walks, playtime, toys, snacks, etc., etc., etc., in world where you cannot control any of it.

For maximizing possible successful outcomes, knowing how to tackle Separation Anxiety, and determining threshold is the first step. Looking at the research on applying behavior modification approaches can yield a wealth of information and can be inspiring in keeping owners on track and motivated with protocols of baby steps and consistency.

Generic plans offer guidelines to start from and can be helpful. Tailoring for the individual dog in treatments with specifics of duration, rewards and more can increase desired results. A study by Blackwell, Casey, et al., compared a generic treatment plan with a customized plan. The study found owners of 56% of the dogs in the generic plan reported significant improvement, while an additional 25% said the dogs showed slight improvement. This is compared with all of the dogs in the customized plan who were reported to have improved.

As any owner or separation anxiety dog would tell you, we should not diminish improvements for those dogs no matter which group they are in. Still, we all want to do better for our dogs and perhaps we can. The more we look at the research, comb the findings, the more inspiration we can take, that efforts, even the few, simple, erratic and haphazard ones, can be effective and have beneficial outcomes.

Scientists, Takeuchi, Houpt, et al., looked at treatment outcomes and owner compliance with 52 dogs seen at the Cornell University Animal Behavior Clinic for separation anxiety. Owners given less than five instructions were found to be the most likely to follow them. Removing punishment, increasing exercise and provisioning a chew toy when leaving were the most implemented directives. According to the owners, 62% of the dogs improved.

Another study on interventions and acquiescence to treatment plans, done in 2011 by Butler, Sargisson, et al., looked at a small number (eight) of separation anxiety dogs where owners were instructed to leave dogs in isolation with food treats three-four times per day. Starting with five-minute segments, increments were increased by five minutes until 30-90 minutes was achieved without phobic reactions. Food was to be provided immediately before leaving and on return. Leaving dogs alone otherwise was discouraged, as was punishment, even as the plan called for ignoring a dog and withholding food for 30 minutes on arriving when evidence, such as defecation, rearranging, etc. was found showing the dog had been distressed. Exercise was instructed for at least 15 minutes daily.

Results showed six of the eight study dogs improving even as compliance was uneven: Food treats were provisioned to only three of the dogs, praise and toys to only two of the

dogs, exercise provided to only five of the dogs, no exercise given to three of the dogs, and punishment ceased for all dogs, save for two who had never been punished. The researchers concluded:

“systematic desensitization was a consistent factor in the improvement of separation related problem behavior” and “The consistency with which systematic desensitization was applied did not predict the speed of progress or final success.” (Butler, R., Sargisson, et al., 2011)

Again, removing punishment, limiting owner absence, and increasing exercise are fairly universal in recommended treatments. It is not uncommon to also see plans which introduce unwitting or negative punishment such as ignoring a dog on leaving and arriving, as in the Butler, Sargisson study above. With a dog who is anxious or frustrated to the point of panic over losing owner presence, this is often counterproductive and can add to and not lessen anxiety.

Scientists Amat, Camps, et al. write on offering just the opposite in their paper on predictability and contextual fear in separation anxiety dogs:

“Predictability is one of the main psychological factors that modulate the stress response” and “we recommend increasing the predictability of the owner’s departure.” (Amat, Camps, et al., 2014)

A review on predictability of events and control as they relate to welfare in captive animals by Bassett and Buchanan-Smith further supports these benefits throughout the research and concludes in touching on the additional benefits of the assurance of structure and routine for animal welfare:

“Studies investigating the effects of predictability of aversive events on behavioural and physiological responses are complex, confusing and often questionable in terms of experimental validity and in their generalisation to common practice. However, they consistently show that animals actively choose (both signalled and temporally) predictable over unpredictable aversive events. Whilst the physiological stress response data are less consistent, and hence further research is required especially with common-place negative events, they also suggest that aversive events should be made predictable, at least if the events are to be present over a short duration only. Further, the evidence suggests that signalled predictability is more critical than temporal predictability.” (Bassett & Buchanan-Smith, 2007)

Adding comfort and affiliate touch to departures can also be valuable for separation related behaviors or anxiety. Mariti, Carlone, et al., compared the effects of gentle touching for one minute before dogs were separated from their owners for three minutes. The dogs tested were not separation anxiety dogs and the petting prior to departure was a new routine for them. Compared to dogs who were not petted prior to owner departure, the dogs:

“displayed behaviors indicative of calmness for a longer period while waiting for an owner’s return and their heart rate showed a marked decrease after the test.” (Mariti, Carlone, et al., 2018)

Despite the limitations of applying the study to SA dogs, the finding is a noteworthy one and adds support to the value of not just saying goodbye but saying it along with offering the reassurance of social support, especially, when such support is offered through contact with an attachment figure.

Comfort can sometimes also be found in food. Environmental enrichment may also be helpful with separation anxiety depending on timing, value and method of delivery. Not accepting food or treats is an indicator that a dog is too stressed to focus on anything beside a heightened emotional state seeking relief. Research shows and I have seen in my own practice, establishing a prior pattern of providing food and treats, in particular meals, with intrinsically satisfying behaviors like prolonged chewing can lessen boredom, frustration, and overall anxiety. A benefit for all dogs, especially SA dogs. Switching food bowls for food puzzles that dogs sniff or chew meals out of over a prolonged duration with their benefit of intrinsic satisfaction for natural behaviors, as opposed to those frustration inducing puzzles or bowls that tip, slow, wait for, or poke, is an intervention that goes a long way to reducing reactivity.

Two studies published in 2022 support the use of food as environmental enrichment in reducing separation anxiety. In the first study, Ok-Deuk Kang found “problematic behaviors” to be the greatest in the first 15 minutes of owner departure with the provision of a food puzzle significantly lessening those behaviors. The Kang study used a variety of food puzzles. In another study, Flint, Atkinson, et al., compared a toy that dispensed dry food, a smart dry food dispensing device, a person speaking to the dog, and a chew toy that lasted for a long period of time. The study found that the chew toy was the most effective at reducing arousal and engaging the dog for the total time observed.

Other approaches to treating separation anxiety include pharmaceuticals which are rarely, if ever, 100% effective, difficult to calibrate dosing and can have severe reported side-effects. It is worthy to note the inherent difficulties in deficiencies of observation and monitoring complications of side effects in species that cannot adequately communicate certain internal states directly to us when considering treatment with psychotropics.

A study on Fluoxetine (sold under the name of Reconcile for dogs or Prozac for humans) showed 42% improvement in medicated dogs undergoing a behavior modification plan at the same time. Side effects in 45% of the medicated dogs was “calm/lethargy/depression”, “anorexia/decreased appetite” was even more common, with reduction in dosing required in 20 of the dogs to reduce vomiting and anorexia. Three serious adverse effects of seizure were seen in the medicated dogs. With this or with similar studies, while there are definite side effects from medication studied, it is difficult to tease out the effects of the medication separate from the behavior plan applied at the same time, or to know if that behavioral plan decreased or contributed to stress.

The Fluoxetine behavior study plan consisted of: ignoring the dog when home should the dog initiate contact, keeping the dog in a sit, down or stay at a distance, giving departure cues at times other than departure, ignoring the dog for 20 minutes before and when leaving, ignoring the dog on return and when the dog had initiated contact. Punishment

was otherwise to be avoided and a food toy was recommended on leaving, which was to be taken away on owner return.

None of this means that it is not possible to get a benefit from drugs, just that research, extreme caution, and monitoring should be used when drugs are introduced. We need to additionally know that even when drugs are recommended by veterinarians, those recommendations include pairing them with behavior modification. Just as important, we also need to carefully evaluate the behavior plans we are putting into place. Good behavior plans make a difference, similarly, so will those behavior plans that are not so good.

Another key aspect to behavior modification, which can be overlooked in conventional treatments, is targeting the frustration and anxiety on multiple levels to treat the whole dog. We already know that research shows increasing exercise and removing punishment helps separation anxiety dogs but there is more.

Here is where we go back to the “magic” of life rewards on dependable, routine schedules, good force free training and structure building, impulse control, and reactivity exercises, like hand feeding one meal a day with “off” and “take it” and games like engage/disengage.

When we talk training, we need to remember this needs to include reinforcing the good behaviors we see when they occur, whether we ask for them or not. We are very much on our game in redirecting and often oblivious for those naturally occurring behaviors we want to see more of. Even lying quietly by your side deserves praise and reward. Key note for an anxious dog.

Because reassurance and predictability is so vital to managing the stress response, I advise saying "good bye" or "see you later", followed by gentle petting goodbye to a dog when leaving. And because we do not want to punish or ignore the positive emotional response of either dog or owner being happy to see each other again, acknowledge and channel excitement on arrival with saying hello and asking them to get their favorite toy.

Add schedules as another way to offer comfort and control to the separation anxiety dog. Feeding, short frequent training sessions, walking and interactive play routinely on schedule can help relieve stress and anxiety. Such consistency provides the dog with a sense of control over some of the most meaningful life rewards and events to anticipate—food, walks, social bonding with owners and more.

To start working on other interventions for reducing separation anxiety, departure cues are an excellent place to begin. After a walk that allows for maximum sniffing opportunities and a highly valuable chew puzzle feeder set aside for departure times, portion the diet to allocate some to this feeder and an extra savory of whatever the dog really likes and give five minutes before leaving. Begin determining how comfortable the dog is when you are getting ready to leave home by noting the dog’s responses to leaving preparations. This step will also include desensitizing and counter conditioning but will be broken down with pausing between each stage of the process you go through when you get ready to leave. We may not give much thought to the process when we get ready to leave or even be aware of our own set and standard routines, or know how much of it is automatic for us, but very little gets past certain watchful eyes where every move is monitored by our hypervigilant separation anxiety dogs.

The key to relieving separation anxiety is desensitizing and counter conditioning to owner absence while an owner is gone and before they leave. Start paying close attention to what is happening with your dog when you begin to think about leaving and the motions

you make as you prepare to do so. Can you stand up to get ready to leave, walk to the coat closet, pick up your briefcase, look for your keys without your dog alerting and stressing? The dog's reaction to each part of the getting ready to leave process counts. Being able to recognize stress signals in your dog can help to establish the difference between under threshold, approaching threshold, and over threshold.

Pay close attention to body language, it is always telling you something. Especially when escalating signs of distress present such as:

- Lip licking (not around food)
- yawning and blinking (not when tired)
- panting
- furrowed brows
- eyes hardening or whites of the eyes
- tensing of facial muscles
- turning head away
- turning body away
- ears back
- standing crouched, tail tucked under
- stiffening up, rigid, body tension increasing

Your dog is reacting emotionally to stress. How long did it take before you saw that first sign of stress? Was there a second sign? What were you doing when you saw these stress signals? This is where keeping time and noting movements comes in. Once you can determine the time period the dog remains calm and where this sits with what stage of the leaving process this is paired with, you have a baseline to begin to work from. Additionally, the very process of desensitization and counterconditioning becomes a routine the dog can depend on. You can then begin to get the dog more used to or desensitize them to the steps of your leaving along with introducing and pair them with good things or counter condition.

It is important to know what span of time exists for the individual dog to stay under threshold/not react/stress to being left or the idea of being left. The trick is to keep the duration time of leaving cues or owner absence very short in the beginning while adding a positive event (food puzzles, long lasting chews, stuffed toys, etc.) at the same time and build minute by minute from there.

It is helpful to clock the amount of time and keep a log of this so you know how to progress in duration. And for those who can walk out the door before the separation anxiety begins, remote video options offer a wealth of information for establishing just how long a dog can be alone without being stressed. Remember, not to leave out your farewell-for-now petting and to say your good bye.

Whatever the amount of time you have determined the dog can be comfortable, whether it is 30 seconds or five minutes, this is the line to hold, from which you can approximate threshold and begin timing the duration of the exercise or trial just under, or in this case, 25 seconds or four minutes to work from.

To note:

- Do not increase progression, steps, or durations in one day

- Keep drills/steps/durations to less than five times a day
- Allow for pauses or time between steps or durations. Wait at least 15 minutes or longer between trials.
- Vary durations - as in alternate with lesser time periods interspersed with longer under threshold duration periods
- Behavior modification is dependent on creating positive associations through food or play. Always remember acknowledge/thank/praise as with any requests or training, and before and after these interactions, steps, or durations.

A lot of separation anxiety plans include stationing or place exercises. Good **IF** used correctly. Do **NOT** use this exercise before leaving or when coming home. You want to create the option the dog can choose on their own, not command it. This is never to be forced or a punishment.

What I call the “go to bed” exercise needs to be practiced with loving encouragement to go to a wonderful and comfortable place to relax with good memories and things in it. To do this: Be close by to your dog’s bed (you may need one for each room), working or watching TV or reading are all good. Offer high value items to the dog to savor in the bed, including soft voiced encouragement, gentle touching, reinforcement and chew toys like bully sticks or pizzles in their bed. Consider feeding meals in puzzle feeders there. You are working towards creating positive associations of a safe and cozy place to go to with the comfort of the people the dogs love in sight of them. This helps to super power the association of this spot.

Doing this exercise more often when you are without company makes it easier for the dog to recall the comfort of the spot when company does arrive or when they are eventually alone. With this or any training, the more you do in a low distraction environment, the greater its power in a high distraction environment. Work on increasing distance from the dog in his/her bed gradually. And alternate that with increasing duration. Be aware of increments and modalities. Never increase distance and duration at the same time or in the same day.

While more research is needed, natural stress remedies that have also been clinically studied without deleterious side effects, as in the use of supplements such as fish oil, probiotics, melatonin, and valerian, can be considered.

Studies also support the effect of being stress being lessened when classical music is played. I suggest leaving a classical music station being played softly in one room. Leaving a radio on amplifies the benefit of the soothing qualities of the music with the added comfort of the dulcet tones of the human hosts and guests, hopefully such voices along with the music, are additional comfort.

Remember, with much of this work, we can push too fast in our hope for results. When things are not working, it is often by going backwards we get to go forward. Go back to the last step in the plan that was working and go from there. Attention to the right plan for your individual dog that includes consistent routines and schedules, limiting owner absence, removing punishment, desensitizing, counter conditioning, targeting anxiety on

multiple levels by allowing for natural behaviors for the whole dog, increasing force free training with praise for the good stuff too - consistency and commitment to all this can be tall orders, but doing any plan starts with beginning them.

Baby steps.

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