

# Helping Your Pet With Separation Anxiety

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Separation anxiety occurs when an animal — most commonly a dog, though some cats may experience this type of anxiety as well — becomes upset due to being apart from their owner or any individual to whom the pet has grown attached.

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If you have ever lived in a household alongside a pet that excessively howls, scratches at the door, or exhibits an overall sense of panic when a loved one leaves the home, it can be beneficial to speak with a veterinarian about the potential diagnosis of separation anxiety.

Dr. Lori Teller, a clinical professor at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, unpacks the actions linked to separation anxiety with methods of how to alleviate the pet's stress and behavioral responses associated with it.

## Unwelcome Changes

Separation anxiety occurs when an animal — most commonly a dog, though some cats may experience this type of anxiety as well — becomes upset due to being apart from their owner or any individual to whom the pet has grown attached.

While anxiety, in general, has many triggers and is frequently multifactorial, Teller said there are specific life-events or experiences that may contribute to a dog's development of separation anxiety, including:

- Abandonment when young
- Poor socialization, especially when young
- Lack of training to be left alone and to entertain itself
- Divorce of a family member
- Death of a family member
- Sudden change in work or school schedules

According to Teller, a dog's personality may also contribute to separation anxiety, as some dogs may be naturally more clingy than others.

## **Stage-Five Clinger**

Because anxiety looks different for every pet, it is important to differentiate excitement or a lack of training from anxiety.

Several identifiable canine behaviors that signal separation anxiety are:

- Pacing
- Whining
- Shaking
- Excessive barking, drooling, or panting
- Destructive behavior, including digging out of the yard, or urinating and defecating in the house

Cats also experience stress when there are major changes in their lives or in the household, but they express it differently. Signs that a cat is experiencing separation anxiety may include:

- Urinating in inappropriate locations
- Lack of appetite
- Loud, excessive meowing

If you have concerns about behaviors your pet is displaying, Teller says it's important to discuss those with your veterinarian. Videos of the behavior can be helpful in determining what is going on.

## **Prescribed Chill Pills**

Teller says treating separation anxiety requires more than a little “chill pill.”

“Medications alone will not resolve separation anxiety,” Teller said. “There are a variety of medications that are used to help alleviate anxiety and make it easier to institute a behavior modification plan.

“Your veterinarian will work with you to create a behavior modification plan to help eliminate undesirable behaviors and replace them with more appropriate ones,” she said.

Another way to help your pet is that when you know a big change is coming, helping them prepare by introducing activities to their routine also may help prevent anxiety when that big change eventually comes.

“Prevention is key, and there are a variety of things that can be done to help prevent separation anxiety in pets,” Teller said. “Pets need to learn that it is OK to be alone and to entertain themselves, even when someone is home.”



When dealing with an anxious dog, crates can offer an enclosed sense of security in their distress.

Introducing puzzle toys, food-stuffed toys, and long-lasting chews are options that can help to replace that comfort person with a comfort item. And for sense-based comfort, playing the radio and keeping consistent pheromone diffusers in use can create a safe and recognizable space without their favorite human by their side.

According to Teller, another method to potentially reduce anxiety is to encourage your pet to exercise and release some energy prior to leaving for your day at school or work. A long walk or run or game of fetch may do. Through exercise, a dog trades morning stress-filled yelps with a morning nap instead.

## **Comfort In Confinement**

Finally, when dealing with an anxious dog, crates can offer an enclosed sense of security in their distress.

“When putting a dog in a crate, use lots of praise and make sure the dog has a puzzle toy or chew treat when it goes into the crate,” Teller said. “As a dog feels more comfortable, you can gradually increase the amount of space it has access to — moving from the crate to a room and then hopefully to most of the house. It is important that a dog learns from early on that a crate is a safe place. Some dogs may not be amenable to crate training until their separation anxiety has lessened.”

Likewise, cats also need safe places, though usually not crates. These safe spaces can include a room with perches at different levels or nooks where they can hide, Teller says.

“If you notice a change in your dog’s or cat’s behavior, speak with your veterinarian, have a complete physical done, and be sure to let your veterinarian know that there have been changes in the pet’s lifestyle or household,” Teller said.

It is important to recognize that separation anxiety is a medical condition and needs to be treated appropriately. By encouraging your pet’s independence, and working with a veterinarian, as necessary, owners can help instill in their beloved companions behaviors that allow them to thrive on their own.