

## Helping a Dog Overcome Separation Anxiety

Dogs often have difficulty being left alone for a variety of reasons. Whatever the reason, the result is often a dog that destroys the house, urinates, defecates, salivates, or chews on themselves leaving sores. The following are some suggested steps to take to help alleviate some of the anxiety that occurs when the humans in the house leave their canine companion alone.

1. The first step involves changing human behavior to help change dog behavior:
  - a. Dogs often build anxiety long before the humans leave the house. The whole routine of picking up keys, putting on makeup or a coat, starts the process for a dog to become anxious about being left alone. To help desensitize the dog to these cues, the humans need to perform the cues often without leaving the house. Pick up the keys and put them back down. Put on a coat and then take it off, etc. all throughout the day when no one is actually leaving.
  - b. The humans in the house also have to be sure there is no drama connected to leaving. No big good-byes, no guilt, just say “Good-bye. See you later,” and leave.
  - c. Dramatic homecomings need to be avoided as well. Walk in the house, put down the keys, take off the coat, all the while ignoring the dog until there is calm behavior. Then say hello.
2. Crate training is helpful in cases of separation anxiety if the dog will readily accept a crate. Some dogs will cause themselves injury in a crate and need to be confined to a small safe space instead. (See the article entitled *Crates and Canines*.)
3. Leave the dog with plenty of fun things to do. See the article *Helping the Chew-a-holic*.
4. Leave the dog for short periods of time at first. The best way to handle this is to take a small vacation from work. With a week’s time to work on the problem, you have a better chance at desensitizing and conditioning the dog to being left alone.
  - a. Start out by leaving for short periods (5 min, 10 min., etc.) and come back, so the dog begins to learn that leaving always leads to coming back. Much of the destruction that dogs do is during the first 30 – 60 minutes that someone is gone. Be sure to leave safe toys to entertain the dog during this timeframe.
  - b. Leave a light or radio on a timer to go on right before you are due to come home. This will give the dog a visual or auditory cue that you soon will be there. Be sure to reset the timer each time you leave. Start this when you are working on the short timeframes of 5 minutes to help the dog see the association.
5. Have a pet sitter come in for a mid-day walk if you will be gone for extended periods. Once the dog discovers that he’s not alone ALL day and is entertained part way through, his destructive behavior may decrease.
6. With severe cases of separation anxiety, drug therapy may be necessary to help ease the dog’s anxiety while behavior modification methods are used to teach the dog new behaviors. Discuss drug therapy with your veterinarian and behavior counselor. Remember drugs are not a cure-all but a step in helping the dog during behavior modification.