

Treating separation anxiety in dogs

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Changing how you leave home, changing your interactions with your dog and uncoupling departure cues from actual departures will allow you to accustom your dog to planned training departures for teaching him/her how to be home alone without anxiety.

Diminishing anxiety on routine departures

- Leave the dog a toy that has been enhanced with food.
- Try to mask departure with other noises, depart by a different door or wear different clothing.
- Keep departures and returns low key.
- Ignore the dog for 10–15 minutes prior to leaving and on return.

Changing interactions with your dog

Giving attention

- Attention should be initiated by you and not the dog.
- All attention should be earned by following a simple command.
- Give your dog attention for calm quiet behaviour.
- Decrease and/or stop the dog from following you around the home.
- DO NOT allow the dog on laps or on furniture unless invited and then for brief interactions only.
- DO NOT pay attention to pawing, leaning, whining, jumping up, etc.
- Always have scheduled interactions daily, including play, training, walks and petting.

Teaching calmness

- Teach your dog to settle and relax on command.
- Use changes in respiration, body posture and facial expressions to assess relaxation in your dog.
- Use a mat or bed as the training location to create a 'safe' space.

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1. Calmly take your dog to the chosen place and request a 'sit' or 'down', or gently place the dog in position.
 2. Give the cue word of your choosing for relaxation but say it only once.
 3. Pick a targeted behaviour to watch; and reward the dog for calmness with a food treat and praise.
 4. Get the dog up; move him/her away; return to the spot; and repeat the exercise.
- Keep session very short (only 5–10 minutes at a time).

Departure training exercises

Uncoupling departure cues from departure

1. Pick up keys, coat or briefcase and walk to the door.
2. **Do not exit.**
3. Return items to their normal location and sit back down.
4. Do not repeat until the dog is calm.

Behaviours to watch for and avoid during this exercise are:

- Increasing anxiety as the trigger is presented
- Inability to settle in between presentations
- Your dog following and watching you.

Counter-conditioning or response substitution for departure anxiety

1. Ask your dog to 'sit and stay' in the vicinity of the usual exit door.
2. Take one or two steps away from him/her.
3. Return to your dog and reward with food and/or praise for remaining still.
4. Gradually increase the time and distance from the dog and toward to the door.
5. As compliance and performance increase, phase out food rewards and only use praise.
6. When the 'sit–stay' approaching the door is learnt, open and close the door.
7. Step outside the door and return.

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Planned training departures

- Do not begin until departure cues have become uncoupled from departure and no longer cause the dog to respond with anxiety.
- Use a new safety signal, and **only** use this signal on planned departures, **never on routine departures**.
- Initial departures must be very short (seconds to minutes).
- Departures must be like usual departures (take keys, briefcase, go in car).
- Ignore the dog for 15 minutes prior to departure.
- Just before leaving, use the new signal.
- Return within the designated time; do not stay away longer.
- Ignore the dog for 10–15 minutes when you return.
- Only increase the length of absence if no pre-departure anxiety is seen and no excitement or anxiety on return is evident.
- Only repeat planned training departures when the dog is calm; do not do several in a row.
- Initial progress may be very slow before the dog can be left for longer periods of time.
- The dog must be calm both when you depart and when you return for the training departure to be useful.
- If anxiety is evident when practising this routine, contact your veterinary surgeon for further instructions.