

Lonely without You: Help Your Dog Cope with Separation Anxiety

If you are unfortunate, like most of us, you must go to work each week. Adopted dogs often become destructive when left alone because they develop SEPARATION ANXIETY. Separation anxiety is something that your dog normally does not do when you are around but seems to always do when you are gone. Some examples are digging, barking, chewing, urinating or defecating in the house or general destructiveness. Stress or anxiety of being alone causes it.

Most young dogs age two and under, always have destructive behaviors because that is part of being a dog! For them, the best thing is to keep them in a safe place while you are gone. That way they do not develop any unwanted habits.

So to deal with the fact you must be away from your dog during the workday, you must teach your dog to accept isolation as part of his life. The following list will help your dog cope with your absence:

1. **TIMEOUTS.** Before you even leave your dog alone, do not spend so much time with him that when it comes time for you to run errands or go to work on Monday, Fido is overanxious at even the thought of you leaving him. Deliberately ignore him for 20 to 30 minutes at least three times a day. (Pretend he is not here, do not pet him, say anything to him, or make direct eye contact. Just move away should he try to paw you, nudge your or crawl in your lap). Once he accepts these timeouts calmly, go on to number two. Make sure your whole family does these time outs, otherwise they are not effective.
2. **PRACTICE PUTTING YOUR DOG IN THE PLACE HE WILL STAY WHEN YOU ARE NOT HOME, ONLY DO IT WHEN YOU ARE HOME AT FIRST.** Put him in his crate or confined in one room in the house and then you remain in the house watching TV or cleaning house. Start by leaving him alone for five minutes several times in one day. Gradually increase the time he is alone until you can safely leave him for two hours at a stretch. You are preparing him for when you shall want to leave the house for work or errands. Correct any unwanted barking or destructiveness but do not let him out unless he is calm and quiet.
3. **PUT YOUR DOG IN A SAFE PLACE WHEN YOU ARE GONE.** Put your dog where he can do no wrong. In other words, a place where he either can not get into trouble, like a crate placed inside your home or a secure chain link dog run. Or put him in a room in your house where you do not care if he rips up the carpet or chews on the door jam.
4. **USE TIME BUFFERS.** Studies have shown that most dogs are at their destructive worst 20 minutes after you leave in the morning for work (Fido is stressed he has to spend the day alone) and 20 minutes before you come home in the evening (Fido is getting geared up to see his favorite person).

Time buffers teach the dog to settle down for the day and to remain unemotional when you first leave or return home. Fifteen minutes before you need to leave the house in the morning, put your dog in his crate, dog run or room (wherever he is to spend the day) and ignore him. When it is time for you to leave, just leave. What you are teaching your dog, is to settle in for the day, and not get so emotional when you say good bye.



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Now do just the reverse when you come home. Leave your dog in his day confinement (or if he is loose in the house, do not touch him, make direct eye contact, or talk to him) for fifteen minutes before greeting him. This will teach your dog that even though you have come home, there is a cooling off period before he can be greeted.

Coming home at night and not immediately greeting your dog seems almost cruel to some people. After all, your dog seems like he's the only one who really loves you and is glad to see you at night! **This method works if you are having a lot of destructive behavior while you are gone, or if you are having excessive jumping.**

5. INCREASE YOUR DOG'S DAILY EXERCISE. A tired dog is a good dog. He is not causing trouble while you are away, he is sleeping, dreaming about when you will come home to play! So get him out to play ball until he can not stand up anymore! Then go to work after doing your time buffer!

6. FEED TWO MEALS A DAY. This will prevent destructiveness due to hunger. Make sure you are feeding a high quality dog food, like those found at a pet store, so that your dog's nutritional needs are being met. Grocery store brands of dog food are not recommended as they use poor quality ingredients.

7. PROVIDE A SPECIAL TOY WHILE YOU ARE GONE. Provide a special safe chewing toy while you are gone. Dogs relieve stress through chewing so you want to have something available for Fido to gnaw on, so he does not go to work on the fence or your nice couch. Do not give your dog old shoes, towels or stuffed animals to chew or play with. Fido is not smart enough to know the difference between an old shoe and your new ninety-dollar running shoes. Teaching your dog to chew on fabric (such as a towel) will come back to haunt you when he destroys all of your laundry or puts a hole in your carpet. Fabric can also create intestinal blockage in your dog as well.

Good chewing toys are Kongs or Tuffy toys stuffed with bits of biscuits or kibble to make them more interesting. Put your stuffed Kongs down just as you are leaving for the day, so Fido is left with something interesting to work on while you are gone. Once you get home, pick up his special toys and put them away for the next time you go away.

That way Fido actually enjoys you leaving because he gets his special chewy!

8. PROVIDE FRIENDSHIP VISITS. Find someone in your neighborhood, like a senior citizen or a parent who can't invest time in having a "full time" dog, who can come over at lunch time to let your dog out for a potty break and a play session also have them use the time buffer when they leave also.

If you come home to a house that has some sort of destruction or elimination, do not shout at, hit, kick, or shove your dog around. In order to correct a dog for a misbehavior, you must catch them in the act. After the fact does you no good in training your dog not to be destructive. Even showing your dog the "misdeed" afterwards will create only more confusion and anxiety. In fact, it will make most cases worse as your dog will become overanxious about you coming home and being angry with him. Just clean up the mess and resolve to put your dog in a safe place until you have worked with him more or until he is out of this destructive phase of his life.

If you have any questions, problems or concerns please call the Humane Society Silicon Valley's Animal Behavior Helpline at (408) 727-3383, extension 753.