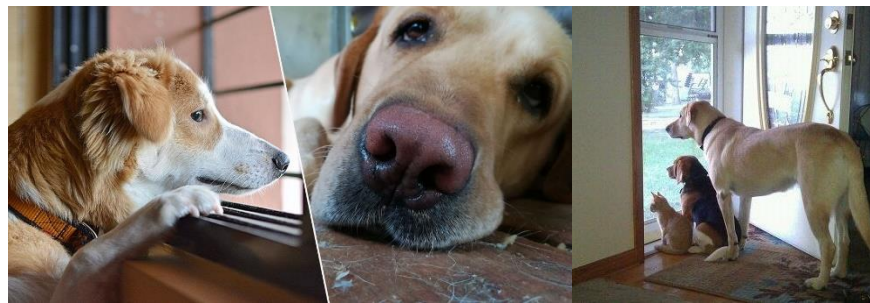


# Separation Anxiety versus Isolation Distress

## What is Separation Anxiety?

- Separation anxiety “is a serious emotional problem where the dog becomes panicked when his owner leaves. Dogs with full-blown Separation Anxiety act as though they are in terror about your departure, and about being alone in the house while you’re gone.” — Patricia McConnell, Ph.D., *I’ll Be Home Soon*.
- Dogs that experience **true separation anxiety tend to develop this over a long period of time** as they form a bond or attachment with a specific person. It is generally a more clinical condition that takes a diagnosis from a vet, veterinary behaviorist, or certified professional dog trainer, and can take months or longer to work dogs through this issue.



## What is Isolation Distress?

- “Isolation distress means the dog doesn’t want to be left alone – any ol’ human will do for company, and sometimes even another dog will fill the bill.” — Pat Miller, *Whole Dog Journal*, July 2008.
- Most dogs who have experienced an inconsistent routine or environment, such as those dogs coming in or out of a shelter, often exhibit isolation distress. If you can imagine, they are unsure of what to predict or what will happen next. It is **common to be more intense as they transition into a new home** with new people, new animals, new sight, and new smells. It will often fade or become minimal as they settle into their environment and a routine that provides sufficient mental and physical stimulation.

## Causes

It has not been entirely established what causes true SA or how it develops, but here is a list of possible contributing factors:

- The dog’s personality – there may be a genetic predisposition to SA
- A dog who has been through a traumatic separation through the death of a family member (human or animal)
- A dog who has never been left alone
- A dog who has experienced some sort of trauma while alone (an attempted or successful burglary or a fire, tornado, or severe storm)

- Re-homing multiple times
- Noise phobia or old age
- The dog or a family member has an extended hospital stay, separating dog from their family
- The arrival of a new family member (human or animal)
- Leaving the litter at too young of an age
- Change in environment such as moving to a new home or downsizing in space

## Diagnosis

Just because your dog has an accident in the house while you are out does not necessarily mean your dog has SA. It could be a housetraining issue. Your dog barking when someone (such as the mail carrier) comes to the door or right when you leave the house also does not indicate your dog has SA. And if your dog chews a pillow when you are gone, it may not be SA. **More than likely the dog is adjusting, bored, and/or under-exercised.**



On the other hand, if you arrive home and your dog is panting, salivating, or there are piles of excrement and puddles of urine throughout the house, you should consider calling in a professional dog trainer/behavior counselor to provide you with an accurate diagnosis.

Diagnosis is commonly done by getting a complete and thorough history on the dog's behavior, training, medical issues (if any), and what the daily routine in the household is like. Many times videotaping or using Skype during your absence will help with the diagnosis and assist with the treatment plan.

## Treatment

**For mild cases of isolation distress** you can often help to manage your dog's stress levels by doing the following:

- Exercise your dog before you leave.
  - Take your dog for a long walk or throw the ball in the backyard for 20–30 minutes before departure.
- Give your dog 15–20 minutes of "calm down" time after exercising before leaving.
- Make your arrivals and departures low key; don't be dramatic.
- Give your dog a sustained-release food toy (e.g. a Kong stuffed with a mixture of Cheese Whiz or peanut butter and kibble, a Buster Cube with kibble in it, a Goodie Ship with gooey food in it, etc.).

- Never scold your dog for having an accident or raiding the garbage.
- Teach your dog what is acceptable to be chewed on (deer antlers, marrow bones, yak chews etc.).
- Teach your dog to be comfortable in a crate or kennel. (see our Crate Training handout)

**For separation anxiety and more intense isolation distress** are some of the most debilitating conditions to deal with for both your dog and YOU! The good news is there are treatment options for these conditions, and in most cases, these are very successful. The bad news for true separation anxiety is, that it takes time – sometimes months. However, you can work with professionals who understand and are thoroughly versed in how to train your dog to adjust to being left alone and even begin to have more positive responses to it.



**In all cases of SA/ID encourage your dog to spend time alone when you are home.** Get some dog puzzle toys or a nice juicy, meaty bone for him to gnaw on in his den while you are in the kitchen making dinner. Be sure they also get plenty of routine exercise and enrichment that meets their mental and physical needs. If your dog is suffering from a severe case of SA/ID please consult a professional to help you and come up with an individualized plan to help your dog's unique needs.

## Resources

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- *I'll Be Home Soon: How to Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety* by Patricia McConnell, Ph.D.

<http://www.dogwise.com/itemdetails.cfm?ID=DTB667>

- *Don't Leave Me: Step-by-Step Help for Your Dog's Separation Anxiety* by Nicole Wilde

<http://www.dogwise.com/itemdetails.cfm?ID=DTB1179>

- *Treating Separation Anxiety in Dogs* by Malena DeMartini-Price

<http://www.dogwise.com/itemdetails.cfm?ID=DTB1345>