

Understanding Separation Anxiety

VANESSA WILLIAMS · SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2020 ·

Separation anxiety is pretty common in dogs, especially rescue dogs. It is completely NORMAL and NATURAL for puppies to be afraid of being alone. Puppies cannot survive by themselves and their biology is telling them that being alone is dangerous. If not addressed and taught in a positive manner that they will be safe being alone and that their people will come back for them, this can develop into true anxiety. Additionally, dogs are a social animal and not designed to be alone doing nothing all day and when a dog has already had major upheavals in family structure (such as changing families), being left alone may trigger stressful memories of the time when the owner never came back. It is a difficult behavior issue to manage because humans nowadays have dogs as in-home pets rather than working partners, so dogs are just expected to deal with being alone for long stretches of time. If a dog has anxiety, any time spent alone sets training back and causes both the dog and owner a lot of stress. These can be very frustrating to experience and rehabilitate, but it's important to understand that dogs exhibiting these anxieties are literally **PANICKING** when left alone. They think that they cannot survive by themselves and are in danger. They need patience and help to learn that they WILL be ok.

There are actually 4 distinct anxieties and one non-anxiety issue that are often clumped together and labeled as "Separation Anxiety". Why does it matter? Because, if you don't understand the motive behind your dog's anxiety, it becomes harder to treat the root cause and makes rehabilitation much more difficult. Treatment for anxieties include positive counter conditioning of being alone and your leaving routine, altering the environment to make it more comfortable for the dog, and sometimes medications so that they can be at a point where panic doesn't completely consume their brains so that they are able to learn how to be comfortable being alone. Non-anxiety issues have a whole different treatment. Sometimes things get complicated because a dog can have multiple different

separation type anxieties at the same time and may need a very personalized rehabilitation plan.

1. **True Separation Anxiety.** This is defined as a dog that has a major attachment to a specific person and becomes anxious when that person is not with the dog. Having another person or dog around usually helps little, if at all. The environment the dog is left in usually doesn't matter, though a familiar environment is often less stressful than an unfamiliar one. This anxiety often lasts for the entire duration the person is gone. The dog may not eat, play, or do any normal behavior while their person is away. True separation anxiety is actually rather uncommon.
2. **Isolation Anxiety.** This anxiety applies to dogs that are just anxious being alone, or being without people, but not a specific person. Having any person around significantly reduces or removes any anxiety. Sometimes having another pet around has the same effect, but not always. This anxiety usually lasts the entire time the dog is alone. The dog will not take food, even really tasty food while alone. Sometimes if brought along in a car, these dogs will stay calm during the separation, but often they will be just as anxious being left in the car. This is the most common cause of "separation anxiety" complaints and generally develops because the dog was never taught how to deal with being alone properly as a puppy and the normal puppy fears escalated.
3. **Confinement Anxiety.** Crating a dog when people are gone is becoming increasingly common. It is usually done to aid in housebreaking and prevent a dog from getting into things or participating in unwanted behaviors (such as barking out the window all day) while the owner is not home. Confinement anxiety is exactly that. The dog is anxious when being confined such as in a crate or small bathroom. The dog feels trapped and without an escape route from any perceived danger, the dog gets anxious. Often, the dog is anxious for the entire time they are confined and cause

damage to themselves, the crate or door, and anything in range. A dog will not usually eat treats when crated, even if their people are standing right next to them. Sometimes having people home and in the room helps them to tolerate it better and they won't panic, but they still show body language and signs of stress when confined. This is pretty common in dogs that were crated without being trained to be comfortable in a crate or have been forced into a crate in the past or have had a fearful experience while being crated. Usually a dog with only confinement anxiety is comfortable being left alone as long as it is free to move about the home a bit.

4. **Abandonment Anxiety.** Rather than fearing being alone, the dog is anxious of the event of people going and them being left behind or left out. Sometimes this is due to them fearing missing out on a fun event, most of the time it is fear that if you go, you won't come back. In these cases, dogs start exhibiting signs of anxiety far before the person actually leaves. It starts when they blow dry their hair, put on makeup, and do other daily routine things that means they are leaving. The actual act of leaving causes the dog extreme stress, but often the dog calms down once they have been alone for 10-15 minutes. While this seems like the easiest form of anxiety to manage, the dog can still do a lot of damage to the home and themselves during the initial panic attack. Dogs with this type of anxiety will often eat or play when alone once they get over the initial panic spike. Often these dogs will not display any anxiety if left alone in a car as to them, this means they get to "come along". This is also a very common anxiety that often does not get treatment until it escalates full blown isolation anxiety, which it often does if not worked through.
5. **Boredom behaviors.** This isn't anxiety at all, but usually due to a dog just not getting enough stimulation in its life and not taught to cope with downtime or relaxing time. These dogs are comfortable being left alone, however they get bored and frustrated and need to DO something to gain mental and physical stimulation, so they proceed to perform unwanted

behaviors with results that are similar to those shown in dogs with anxiety. These include destructive behavior, getting into the garbage, barking excessively out the window, knocking over furniture, etc. In anxious dogs, destruction is usually targeted at doors and windows: methods of leaving the home to be back with their people. In bored dogs, the mayhem is general and not confined to one specific place. Barking is not general, often continuous vocalization as in anxious dogs, but targeted barking at people/dogs/animals/noises outside of the home. Creating a fulfilling lifestyle for a dog, working gradually on impulse control and teaching a dog how to cope with boredom and downtime in an appropriate manner usually fixes this quickly.

Remember, dogs exhibiting any kind of unwanted behavior while alone should **NEVER** be corrected/punished, especially when you find the aftermath. Too much time has passed and they will NOT understand why they are being scolded. Punishing anxiety often backfires as the dog is already feeling awful and panicking is a reaction, not a choice. Being punished for feeling anxious just makes the dog (or person!) feel even worse and makes the problem escalate.