

From the editors of



Separation Anxiety

Canine Separation Anxiety

How to arrest and reverse one of the biggest problems facing dogs and their caregivers.

Have you ever had the misfortune of walking into your house to find overturned furniture, inches-deep claw gouges on door frames, blood-stained tooth marks on window sills, and countless messages on your answering machine from neighbors complaining about your dog barking and howling for hours on end in your absence? If so, you're probably familiar with the term "separation anxiety" - a mild label for a devastating and destructive behavior.

Thirty years ago the phrase was uncommon in dog training circles. Today it's a rare dog owner who hasn't heard of separation anxiety, experienced it with a one of her own dogs, or at least had a friend whose canine companion reportedly suffered from this difficult disorder. Separation-related behaviors seem more common these days, and sadly, can also result in human frustration and anger - and sometimes even the euthanasia of an offending dog when a despairing owner reaches her wits' end.

In her excellent book, *Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Small Animals*, Dr. Karen Overall defines separation anxiety as, "A condition in which animals exhibit symptoms of anxiety or excessive distress when they are left alone." The most common signs of the condition include destructive behavior, house soiling, and excessive vocalization. Many dogs with this challenging

behavior also refuse to eat or drink when left alone, don't tolerate crating, pant and salivate excessively when distressed, and go to great lengths to try to escape from confinement, with apparent total disregard for injury to themselves or damage to their surroundings.

It's natural for young mammals to experience anxiety when separated from their mothers and siblings; it's an adaptive survival mechanism. A pup who gets separated from his family cries in distress, enabling Mom to easily find him and rescue him. In the wild, even an adult canine who is left alone is more likely to die - either from starvation, since he has no pack to hunt with, or from attack, since he has no pack mates for mutual protection.

Given the importance of a dog's canine companions, it speaks volumes about the dog's adaptability as a species that we can condition them to accept being left alone at all! We're lucky we don't have far more problems than we do, especially in today's world, where few households have someone at home regularly during the day to keep the dog company.

There was a time in our society when fewer dogs were left home alone - Mom stayed home while Dad went off to work every day - so dogs had less exposure to the kind of daily isolation that contributes to separation anxiety behavior. Some behavior scientists theorize that experiencing a fear-causing event when a young dog is already mildly stressed about being alone can trigger more intense "home alone" anxiety behaviors.

In today's world there are a significant number of dogs who are afflicted with some degree of separation distress. Fortunately, many dog owners these days are willing to seek solutions to behavior problems rather than just "getting rid of" the dog. As a result, behavior professionals are likely to see canine clients with separation distress disorders.

Differential diagnoses

Another reason separation anxiety seems more prevalent today than a few decades ago is

that it is misdiagnosed with some frequency by laypersons. With an increased awareness of the condition has come an increase in misidentification of behaviors that resemble separation distress behaviors, but really aren't.

For example, house soiling can be related to anxiety, but there are many other potential causes. These include incomplete housetraining, lack of access to appropriate elimination areas, unreasonable owner expectations (expecting the dog to "hold it" for 10 hours or more), fear, excitement, marking, submissive elimination, or physical incontinence.

Destructive behavior may be a result of separation anxiety, or it could be normal puppy behavior, play, reaction to outside stimuli, and/or an outlet for excess energy. Separation distress could be the cause of excessive barking and howling, or the dog could be stimulated to bark by street sounds (traffic, people talking), trespassers (i.e., a mail carrier, intruder, Girls Scouts selling cookies), social facilitation (other dogs barking), play, aggression, or fear.

It's critically important that a problem behavior be correctly identified prior to the implementation of a behavior modification program. It does no good to try to modify separation anxiety if that's not really the problem.

If elimination accidents occur when the owner is home as well as when the dog is left alone, it's more likely a housetraining problem than a separation issue. Separation-related destruction is usually directed toward escape efforts - chewing or clawing at or through doorframes, windowsills, and walls. If the destruction is more generalized throughout the house, it points toward one or more of the other possible causes, rather than an isolation issue. A strategically located video camera or sound-activated tape recorder can help identify possible outside stimuli, such as visitors to the home or unusual noises, that might trigger what otherwise may appear to be separation-related behaviors.

A continuum



A dog with separation anxiety might not be comforted by another dog or person at home. Early on, he may be simply concerned when the human to whom he is most bonded walks out the door; later, he may panic when this happens.

Distress over being left alone is not always a full-blown separation anxiety problem. First, a dog may suffer from a mild distress to a severe anxiety disorder. "Distress" indicates a lower intensity of stress behaviors when the dog is alone, while "anxiety" is an extreme panic attack.

The distinction between "isolation" and "separation" is equally important. 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. True separation distress or anxiety means the dog is hyper-bonded to one specific person, and continues to show stress behaviors if that person is absent, even if other humans or dogs are present.

Our Cardigan Corgi, Lucy, suffers from moderate isolation distress - she doesn't like to be left alone outdoors. Before we realized the significance of her behavior, she managed to injure herself badly, falling off a stone wall onto cement steps eight feet below in her persistent attempts to reach us through a window. Indoors, her isolation distress is milder. She may bark briefly if we leave her

alone downstairs, but quickly calms and settles.

Missy, on the other hand, demonstrates true separation distress. The eight-year-old Australian Shepherd had been in at least four different homes prior to joining our family last fall. As is sometimes the case with dogs who have been rehomed numerous times, she attached herself to one of her new humans (me) completely and almost instantly.

If our whole family is in the barn, and I go back to the house for some reason, Missy could care less that my husband is still with her in the barn; she becomes hyper-vigilant, watching anxiously for me to return, ignoring Paul's attempts to reassure her or engage in other activities. Fortunately for us, her stress level is mild; other than some scratches inflicted to our kitchen door on the second day of her arrival to our home, she's done nothing destructive; her level of stress over my absence is low, and tolerable, and consists primarily of pacing, whining, and barking. But it may explain why we're at least her fifth (and final!) home.

Behavior modification

There are a number of steps you can take to resolve your dog's isolation- or separation-anxiety behavior. The program spelled out in the accompanying can also be used to modify an existing isolation/separation condition. However, you will progress much more slowly through the steps of the program with a dog who suffers from separation-related behaviors; your dog's strong emotional response to being left alone will make this a much more challenging proposition.

Here are some other avenues to explore, to complement your modification work:

- Exercise your dog well before you leave. A tired dog has less energy with which to be anxious and destructive. End exercise sessions 20 to 30 minutes before you go, so he has time to settle down.;
- Five minutes before you leave, give him

a well-stuffed Kong to take his mind off your imminent departure.

- Make your departures and returns completely calm and emotionless. No huggy/kissy "Mummy loves you" scenes. If he gets excited and jumps all over you when you return, ignore him. Turn your back and walk away. When he finally settles down, say hello and greet him very calmly.
- Defuse the pieces of your departure routine by also doing them when you are not leaving. Pick up your car keys and sit down on the sofa to watch TV. Dress in your business suit and then cook dinner. Set your alarm for 5 a.m. on a Saturday, then roll over and go back to sleep.
- Mix up the pieces of your departure routine when you are leaving, so his anxiety doesn't build to a fever pitch as he recognizes your departure cues. We are creatures of habit too, so this is hard to do, but can pay off in big dividends. Eat breakfast before you shower instead of after. Pick up your keys and put them in your pocket before you take your dog out for his final potty break. Put your briefcase in the car while you're still in pajamas. Make the morning as unpredictable as possible.
- Use a "safe" cue such as "I'll be back," only when you know you'll return within the time period your dog can tolerate. As suggested in Patricia McConnell's wonderful booklet on separation anxiety titled "I'll Be Home Soon," this helps your dog relax, knowing he can trust you to return.
- Explore alternative dog-keeping situations to minimize the occasions when you do have to leave him alone - doggie daycare may be suitable for some dogs, but not for others. You may be able to find a neighbor or relative who is house-bound and might appreciate some

canine companionship.

- If you are considering adoption of a second dog, try borrowing a calm, stable, compatible dog from a friend, to see if that helps to relieve your dog's distress.
- Try using Comfort Zone (DAP) plug-ins and sprays in his environment to help ease his anxiety.
- Remove as many other stressors from your dog's world as possible to help him maintain his equilibrium in your absence. No choke chains, shock collars, physical or harsh verbal punishment (especially in connection to his anxiety behaviors).
- Consider working with a behavior professional to be sure you're on the right path - and to help you explore the possibilities of using anti-anxiety medications to maximize the effectiveness of your modification efforts.



Remember, some problem dog behavior is actually a human behavior problem. It's your responsibility to manage your dog's environment so he has few opportunities to do things that make you unhappy. Put those shoes in the closet and close it!

Fixing separation anxiety is hard work. It's all too easy to get frustrated with your dog's destructive behavior. Remember that he's not choosing to do it out of spite or malice - he is panicked about his own survival without you, his pack, there to protect him. It's not fun for him, either; he lives in the moment, and the moments that you are gone are long and terrifying. If you make the commitment to modify his behavior and succeed in helping him be brave about being alone, you'll not only save your home from destruction, you will enhance the quality of your dog's life immensely - as well as your own - and perhaps save him from destruction, too.

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Relieving Anxiety

Many separation anxiety dogs can improve with training & management.

You are at your wits' end. You were gone for less than an hour, and when you returned home, your dog Maxx had already destroyed your new sofa, defecated on your antique Oriental rug, and inflicted deep gouges in the just-repainted front door frame.

You have tried leaving him in the backyard, but he chewed through the fence and got picked up by animal control. You tried crating him, but he scraped his toenails bloody and broke a canine tooth trying to dig and chew through the crate door. When you left him in the garage he

tore everything within reach to shreds. When you left him in a covered chain-link dog pen on the back patio, you got complaints from three different neighbors about his nonstop barking and howling. You've even tried showing him the damage and punishing him for it, but it hasn't helped. You hate to think of giving him up, but you don't know what to do with him. If he would only behave himself when you are away from home.

Maxx has separation anxiety – a behavior problem that results from a dog's natural instincts to want to be near other members of his pack. It is a normal survival instinct, but one that can often be derailed early in a pup's life through proper conditioning (see "Learning to Be Alone," WDJ July 2001). For you and Maxx, however, it's too late for the proper early stuff. Mad Maxx already has a full-blown case of separation anxiety, and now you need to try to fix it.

Conditioned response

It won't be easy. Separation anxiety is a panic attack – your dog's classically conditioned response to the terror of being left alone. When you walk out the door, Maxx doesn't sit around and muse about whether or not to eat the sofa. Separation anxiety behavior is not a conscious choice – it just happens.

In fact, his anxiety begins before you even leave the house; your dog can tell from your morning routine whether this is a get-up-and-go-to-work day (which leaves Maxx home alone) or a relax-and-stay-at-home day. As soon as Maxx determines that it's a work day, he starts to worry, and every step in the routine increases his anxiety. The 5a.m. alarm clock. The rush to put Maxx out to potty and then toss him his food dish. The shower and shave. The suit and the shiny shoes instead of blue jeans and sneakers. Coffee and a banana instead of bacon and eggs. The grab for the briefcase and car keys, the pause at the front door for dramatic hugs and kisses to Maxx, and the fervent admonitions to behave himself while you're gone.

Phew! By the time the door closes in his face and



Spending all day alone is a scary thing for dogs, who are genetically programmed to seek comfort and security in a pack of family members. Behaviors such as chewing and digging are effective methods of relieving the stress of being alone.

you rush down the sidewalk to the car, Maxx is already worked up into a high state of arousal. He makes no conscious decision to go on a destruction binge – he is simply stressed to the max. Effective ways for him to relieve his stress include chewing, digging, urinating, defecating, and vocalizing.

Anxiety or hijinks?

Most separation anxiety behavior happens within 30 minutes of the owner's departure and within a similar period before the owner's anticipated return. This is one of the keys to determining whether Maxx's behavior is truly an anxiety reaction or simply a bout of puppy hijinks.

If you can leave and come back in an hour to an unscathed home but four hours puts Maxx over the top, chances are you're dealing with boredom, excessive energy, or a housetraining issue rather than true separation anxiety. (Some dogs will become destructive in their efforts to go outside to relieve themselves if they are very committed to not soiling the house.)

If, on the other hand, your dog displays immediate signs of anxiety upon your exit, he's a candidate for SA retraining. If you can just get the anxious dog through the first half-hour or so, and avoid raising his anxiety level at homecoming time, you are usually home free. Simple – but not easy.

This task is best accomplished through a program of counter-conditioning and desensitization (CC&D) – fancy terms to describe getting Maxx to like something he now intensely dislikes or fears. In this case, the “something” is being left alone.

The challenge with using CC&D for separation anxiety is that ideally you start with a very low level stimulus that the dog can tolerate, associate it with something wonderful (like the dog’s favorite treats), and gradually work up to a level of normal stimulus, while taking care not to trigger the unwanted response during the process.

If you are desensitizing a dog to loud noises, for example, it is relatively easy to prevent his exposure to noisy environments between training sessions. It’s considerably more difficult for the average pet owner to design a schedule that leaves Maxx alone for no more than a few seconds at first, then minutes, then hours, during the weeks or months that it takes to build his tolerance to being alone. If you are truly committed to working through the problem, and have the time and energy, you can get through this.

Managing Maxx

So, where do you start when you can’t confine him, you can’t trust him loose in the house or yard, and you can’t punish him? What are you supposed to do with a Mad Maxx who is rapidly wrecking everything you possess? You need to do two things:

- Manage his environment while his behavior is being modified so he can’t hurt himself or destroy the things around him.
- Using counter-conditioning and desensitization, teach Maxx that it is safe for him to be alone.

Let’s start with the easy one: managing the environment. This means not leaving Maxx alone until he has decided that being alone is okay.

You might be able to find a friend, neighbor, or relative who is home during the day, where Maxx can stay and be safe. Perhaps you are fortunate enough to work in a place where your dog could come to the office with you. It never hurts to ask!

Doggie daycare is another excellent option. Commercial daycare centers are thriving in an increasing number of communities around the country; there might be a good one near you. Be sure the daycare operator knows that Maxx has separation anxiety and understands how to deal with it – that he can’t be left alone and must not be punished for anxiety-related behavior.

Sometimes, although only very rarely, getting another dog can help. If you are considering this, you should only get a second dog because you want one and are committed to keeping the newcomer whether it helps Maxx’s problem or not. Be careful – you could end up with two dogs with separation anxiety/destructive behavior!

Finally, there are pharmaceuticals that have appeared on the market relatively recently that purport to help with resolving a multitude of canine behavior problems. Clomicalm (clomipramine hydrochloride) is the one most commonly prescribed for separation anxiety, but must be used in conjunction with a good behavior modification program in order to be truly effective; the drug alone will not solve the problem.

Maximized training

A behavior modification program will help your dog understand that he can survive being left alone. Depending on the severity of the problem, this may happen relatively quickly, or it may take a long time and never be completely resolved. If you have a Velcro dog who can’t even tolerate you being in the next room, you will need to start with very small steps. Here’s one program for working with separation anxiety:

1. Teach your dog to accept a tether with you standing right next to him. When he is comfortable on the tether, take one step away, say “Yes!” before he has a chance to get upset (or

Click! your clicker, if he is clicker-trained), then step back to him and feed him a treat. Repeat this step until he shows no sign of anxiety when you are one step away. Be sure that you remain very matter-of-fact about stepping away. If you get excited or emotional, so will he.

2. Now, gradually increase the length of time that you remain one step away before you “Yes!” (or Click!) and return, until he will tolerate your one-step distance for a full minute or longer. Vary the longer times with shorter ones, so he doesn’t start to get anxious about the exercise getting harder and harder each time. You want him to never know how long you will be gone, and at the same time you are teaching him that you always return.

3. Now take two steps away, say “Yes!” and immediately return to feed him a treat. Repeat at this distance until he is comfortable with you being two steps away, then again gradually increase the time at this distance.

4. Very gradually increase the distance, repeating the exercise at each new step until he is calm, then increasing the time at each new distance. If he panics at any point, you have moved too quickly – go back to the previous distance and work there again until he is calm. Then take another half-step, if necessary, to avoid triggering his panic.

5. When he will remain calm while you walk to the other side of the room, sit down, and read a magazine, you are ready for the next phase. Start the exercise as before, but this time walk to the doorway to another room, step outside briefly, “Yes!” and step back into the room before he has a chance to get upset that you are out of sight. Return and reward. Repeat this until he is calm about you stepping out of the room, and then gradually increase the length of time that you remain out of sight.

6. Now, sometimes close the door as you step out of the room, briefly at first, then for longer periods.

7. Do the same exercise with each of the doors leading from the room, including the door that

leads to the outside. Sometimes leave the door open, sometimes close it. Be sure to return and reward each time before your dog goes into panic mode. If he starts acting anxious at any time, slow down, and go back to a part of the exercise that he can tolerate. Then, when he is calm, proceed more slowly to the step that upset him.

8. Now take him off the tether and repeat Step 6, closing the door each time to prevent him from following you out of the room. Start with very brief departures, so he doesn’t have time to start digging at the door. Gradually increase the length of time you are out of the room, but remember to intersperse the longer ones with short ones so he never knows how long you will be gone. Remember, too, to remain calm yourself. If you start getting anxious or excited about the process, so will he.

9. When he is comfortable with you stepping outside for several minutes, start adding bits of your departure routine to the exercise. Pick up your keys, step outside briefly, return, “Yes,” and reward. Then put the keys down. Go outside, open and close the car door, then come back inside. “Yes” and reward. As he gets better with pieces of the routine, add more pieces.

10. Assuming that you drive a car to work or school, the next step is to actually start the car engine, then come back inside and reward. Start the car engine, then vary the amount of time you wait before coming back in to reward. Drive down the driveway, then drive back to the house, come back in and reward. Your goal is to gradually increase the length of time you can be outside to 30 minutes or more. If you can hit the magic 30-minute mark, you are well on your way to success.

Pacing is key

Be sure to proceed through these 10 steps at a pace that your dog can tolerate. Short, successful sessions at first (five to 10 minutes), are better than long, frustrating sessions that end in failure. You may be able to proceed through the steps in a week or two if your dog’s separation anxiety is mild, but it is more likely that it may take you several weeks, or months, to work up to 30

minutes. If you aren't making any progress at all, talk to your veterinarian about adding Clomicalm to the equation.

Fixing separation anxiety is hard work, and it's easy to get frustrated with your dog's destructive behavior. Remember that he's not choosing to do it out of spite or malice – he is panicked about his own survival without you, his pack, there to protect him. It's not fun for him – he lives in the moment, and the moments that you are gone are long and terrifying.

If you make the commitment to modifying his behavior and succeed in making him brave about being alone, you will not only have saved your home from destruction, you will have enhanced the quality of your dog's life immensely, and perhaps saved him from destruction, too.

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Learning to be Alone

How (and why) to keep your dog from developing separation anxiety.

Thank goodness, I have never owned a dog with separation anxiety. This complex behavior challenge can be one of the most difficult to live with, and one of the toughest to resolve. The dog who panics when left alone may manifest a range of behaviors that the average owner finds intolerable, including serious household destruction (I've heard about dogs who have clawed holes through the walls of their homes, all



Researchers have learned that most dogs with separation anxiety are the most upset and destructive in the first 20 minutes after their owners have left home.

the way through the outdoor siding), self-injury from biting or clawing at doors or walls, hysterical vocalization (nonstop whining, crying, barking, howling, and/or screaming), and inappropriate defecation and urination – on floors, carpets, beds, and owners' possessions.

Separation anxiety (SA) stems from a dog's natural survival instinct to stay in close proximity to the pack. In the wild, a canine who is left alone is more likely to die, either from starvation, since he has no pack to hunt with, or from attack, since he has no pack mates for mutual protection.

Given the vital importance of a dog's canine companions, it speaks volumes about their adaptability as a species that we can condition them to accept being left alone at all! We're lucky we don't have far more SA problems than we do, especially in today's world, where few households have someone at home regularly during the day to keep the dog company.

Recipe for failure

It's not enough that dogs are naturally inclined to become anxious when left alone. Many well-intentioned but misguided owners of new dogs inadvertently set the stage for SA by doing all the wrong things when they first bring their new dog home.

For example, lots of families adopt their new dog or puppy at the beginning of the summer, when the kids will be home to spend a lot of time with him. Other new-dog parents may take several days off from work, or at least arrange to bring the dog home on a Friday afternoon so they have the entire weekend to help the new kid settle in. On its face, this is a thoughtful approach to acclimating the dog to his new life. What better way to help him feel comfortable and welcome than to give him a couple of days of your loving company?

It's true that spending extra time with the newcomer can help smooth the transition for him, but unless you take some important precautions, you could be setting him up for a rude awakening on Monday morning when you go back to work, leaving him alone all day to wonder and worry the pack is ever coming back to rescue him from solitary confinement.

Recipe for success

The key to SA is to never trigger it in the first place. This is without a doubt one of those behaviors where it is well worth investing in many ounces of prevention, lest you end up spending many beginning with making a wise selection of your new family member.

Dogs adopted from animal shelters seem to have a higher than average incidence of SA. We don't know whether this is because dogs with SA are more likely to be recycled through shelters by their frustrated owners, or because the stress of shelter life triggers SA in previously unaffected dogs. It's likely that both explanations play a significant role. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't adopt from a shelter. It means that you need to look for signs of potential SA whatever the source of your new dog, and especially if you adopt from a shelter or rescue group.

Dogs who seem anxious in general are more likely candidates for SA, particularly those who are worried and clingy. Velcro dogs who won't leave your side in the get-acquainted area, even though they have just met you, can be hard to resist. "She loves me already," you think to yourself. "How

can I possibly leave her here to face the risk of euthanasia?"

Indeed, that kind of instant bond can be very endearing in the moment. It is far less so when you get home from a hard day's work to find your sofa cushions in shreds, and dog feces and urine smeared across the kitchen, or worse, a note from your landlord informing you that elderly Mr. Jones with a heart condition who lives in the apartment next door called 11 times today to complain that someone was screaming at the top of their lungs in your living room. If you do think that's your furry soulmate glued to your leg in the get-acquainted room, do a simple test. Place an inexpensive pillow or cushion that you have purchased at Goodwill for this very purpose on the chair or floor, and leave the dog alone in the room for 10 minutes. Wait outside, close enough that you can hear any activity. Ideally, the shelter will have a one-way window into the room, so you can watch her but she can't see you. Now, take note of what she does.

A certain amount of activity is normal. She might explore the room, playfully chew on the pillows or other dog toys, snuffle at the door, and stand up on her hind legs to look out the window. She might even whine or bark a bit to see if anyone responds. As long as she seems relatively calm, and settles down after several minutes, you're not looking at SA behavior, despite her instant and endearing connection to you. You will still need



All dogs can benefit from practicing being in a room with you (but not interacting with you in any way) and being alone in a room by themselves.

to take precautions not to trigger SA once you get her home, but again, that's easier than undoing an existing condition.

If, however, she charges in a panic from one end of the room to the other, digs frantically at the door, flings herself bodily at the window, shreds the pillow into tiny pieces and proclaims her distress vocally and insistently, you are looking at a serious behavior challenge. If you choose to adopt her anyway, be prepared to enter into a long-term, potentially costly relationship with a good, positive behavior counselor and a doggie daycare facility.

Puppies are less likely to come complete with a fully developed set of SA behaviors, but again, some are more likely candidates than others. Puppies will naturally exhibit some concern at being isolated from their littermates, but the pup who happily visits with you or explores his new environment is a safer bet than the one who shows immediate distress and a single-minded determination to return to his siblings. A conscientious breeder who makes an effort to separate littermates for brief, non-traumatic periods between the ages of six to eight weeks can help set the stage for a puppy who is able to tolerate being left alone when he arrives in his new home.

Prevention program

There are two primary ingredients in a successful New Dog/Puppy Separation Anxiety Prevention Program. The first is to resist the natural impulse to return to and reassure the new dog or puppy every time he cries. The second is to build his trust that you have not abandoned him. Here are the 10 steps of a two-day program to create a dog who is comfortable being left alone:

1. Arrange to bring your dog home at a time when someone will be able to spend a few days with him. This does help ease the stress of the transition.
2. Have a quiet, safe space prepared for your new dog in advance. A playpen or puppy pen is ideal for a puppy or small dog, and allows him to be confined quietly, but still in your company. (See

“Getting Off to the Best Start,” WDJ January 1999). Another alternative is a dog-proofed room such as a laundry room.

3. When you bring the dog home, first give him a chance to relieve himself outdoors, and spend 10-15 minutes with him in the house under close supervision. Then pen him and stay in the room with him. Arm yourself with a good novel; this is an all-day project!

4. Stay close to your dog at first. Read your book, and if he fusses to get out of the pen, ignore him. When he is calm, take one step away and then return, before he has a chance to get upset. Pet him calmly a few times and then go back to reading your book.

You are starting to teach your dog that he doesn't have to be with you every minute, and that if you leave, you will return. You want him to become secure in the knowledge that you always return.

(Note: If there are other human family members, you will need to choreograph their presence and movements also. The plan is to get the dog accustomed to being left alone, not just to get him used to you being away from him.)

5. As long as the dog stays calm, continue to occasionally step away, gradually increasing the distance and varying the length of time that you stay away, so that eventually you can wander around the room without upsetting him.

Each time you return, greet him calmly. You want him to associate your comings and going with a calm, relaxed attitude, not with excited anticipation.

Every once in a while say “Yes!” in a calm but cheerful voice before you return to him, then walk back to the pen or tether and feed him a treat.

6. After an hour or so, give him a break. Take him outside to potty, and play with him for a while. Toss a ball or stick. Let him explore the fenced yard. Hang out for a while. Then go back inside and resume his pen exercises.

7. Begin again at the beginning, staying near the pen until he settles. More quickly this time, move along Steps 4 and 5 until you can wander around the room without generating any alarm. Now step into another room very briefly, and return before your dog has time to get upset that you are gone. Repeat this step, gradually increasing the amount of time you stay out of the room, interspersing it with wandering the room, sitting near him reading a book, and sitting across the room reading. If your dog starts to fuss, wait until he stops fussing before you move back toward him. Teach him that calm behavior makes you return, and that fussing keeps you away.

8. Occasionally, step outside of the house, not just into another room. Your goal for Day One of a two-day program is to get your dog comfortable with you being away from him for 15 to 20 minutes. (It is usually the first 20 minutes of separation that are most difficult for a SA dog to endure.) It is important to vary the times, so he doesn't start getting antsy in anticipation of your return. Remember to give him plenty of potty and play breaks, every hour for a young pup, every one to two hours for an older dog.

9. On Day Two, quickly go through the warm-up steps again, until you are stepping outside for 15-20 minutes at a time, interspersed with shorter separations. On one of your outdoor excursions, hop into your car and drive around the block. Return in 5-10 minutes, and calmly reenter the house without drama, just as you have been during the rest of the exercises. Hang out for a while, then go outside and drive away again, for a half-hour this time.

10. Now it's time for Sunday brunch. Be sure your dog gets a thorough potty and play period, then give him 15 minutes to relax. Put a food-stuffed Kong into his pen, round up the family, and calmly exit the house together for an outing of a couple of hours' duration. When you arrive home to a pup who is calm and happy to see you, drink an orange juice toast to his graduation from SA Prevention School.

Graduate school

You're not quite finished yet. Your dog has learned to tolerate your absence for a couple of hours, but that's a far cry from an eight-hour workday. A young puppy will have to go to the bathroom several times a day, and it's too soon to trust that a new adult dog has an iron bladder. If you force your dog to break housetraining contrary to his very strong instinct not to soil his den, you can create the kind of panic that triggers SA, and undo all your careful work of the last two days. You need a plan that will allow him to answer the call of nature as his age, maturity, and training dictate. Options include pet sitters, doggie daycare, an accommodating neighbor who can give your pup potty breaks several times throughout the day, taking the dog to work with you, or staggering the family lunch schedule until he is old enough, or trustworthy enough, to be left home alone all day.

If at any time you do come home to a mess, stay calm. Punishing your pup when you get home for making a mistake in your absence is another common SA trigger; he starts to get anxious about your returns, when you yell and storm around for no apparent reason. Remember, if a dog does things he's not supposed to sometime in the hours before you come home, he will have no idea that you're upset about those things; your yelling is too far removed from his inappropriate behavior for him to make the connection. He just learns that you sometimes act a little nuts when you get home, and that is something to be anxious about!

Avoid dramatic departures and returns, never punish him for damage or accidents that occur in your absence, and set up a routine to help your dog succeed in behaving well, he will someday earn his Master's Degree in Home Alone, and be trusted with full house freedom. It may be too late for some dog owners to say they've never had a dog with Separation Anxiety, but it's never too late to say "never again."