

Home Alone Anxiety

Typically, dogs with home alone anxiety have the anxiety response during the owner's preparations for leaving and/or within a short time (0-30 minutes) after their owners leave them. The most common of these behaviors are:

- Digging, chewing and scratching at doors or windows in an attempt to escape and reunite with their owners.
- Howling, barking, crying and whining in an attempt to get their owner to return.
- Urination and defecation (even with housetrained dogs) as a result of distress.

Why does this happen?

We don't fully understand exactly why some dogs suffer from this and, under similar circumstances, others don't. It is important to understand that the destruction and house soiling are not the dog's attempt to punish or seek revenge on his owner for leaving him alone, but are actually part of a panic response.

Home Alone issues sometimes occur when:

- A dog has never or rarely been left alone in the past.
- Following a long interval, such as a vacation, during which the owner and dog are constantly together.
- After a traumatic event (from the dog's point of view,) such as a period of time spent at a shelter or boarding kennel.
- After a change in the family's routine or structure (a child leaving for college, a change in work schedule, a move to a new home, a new pet or person in the home, death of an animal companion.)
- Age related changes.

How do you know?

If most, or all, of the following statements are true about your dog, he may have a home alone problem:

- The behavior occurs exclusively when he's left alone.
- He follows you from room to room whenever you're home.
- He is very well behaved when you are present.
- He displays effusive, frantic greeting behaviors.
- The behavior always occurs when he's left alone, whether for a short or long period of time.
- He tries to leave with you when you prepare to leave the house.
- He dislikes spending time outdoors by himself.

What can you do?

- Keep arrivals and departures low-key. Ignore your dog for the first few minutes, and then calmly pet him.
- Leave your dog with something that has your scent on it such as a t-shirt you've slept in.
- Establish a "safety cue" – a word or action that you use every time you leave that reassures your dog you'll be back (like a playing radio or television, a safe bone or toy). Use your safety cue during practice sessions, but NOT when you leave for a period of time longer than he can tolerate or the value of the safety cues will be lost.

Teaching Down-Stay

Practice this exercise using positive reinforcement and when you are at home with no intention to leave the house. Work on getting him to love going to his "place." If your dog has a place where he naturally selects to relax when you are home, use that place. Sometimes it is best to find a spot where he can easily see out so he can see you return. Practice "down stay" many times a day and do not associate this with your departure. Never call your dog to you at the end of the stay. Always walk back to him to show that if he remains calm in his place, that you will always come back to him.

Gradually increase the distance you move away from your dog. Your goal is to be able to move briefly out of your dog's sight while he remains in the "down stay" position. The point is to teach him that he can remain calmly and happily in one place while you go to another. As you progress, you can do this during the course of your normal daily activities. For

example, if you're watching television with your dog by your side and you get up for a snack; tell him to stay, and leave the room. When you come back, give him a treat or quietly praise him for staying there.

Desensitization Techniques

Teach your dog to remain calm during "practice" departures:

- Engage in your departure activities (betting your keys, putting on your coat,) then sit back down. Repeat this step until your dog shows no distress in response to your activities and leave a treat in his "place" so if he chooses to go there, he will get a reward.
- Next, go to the door and open it, then close it and sit back down. Do not make a fuss of your dog. Say "good boy" if he remains where he is or goes to his place.
- Next, step outside the door, leaving the door open, then immediately return.
- Finally, step outside, close the door, and then immediately return. Slowly get your dog accustomed to being alone with the door closed between you for several seconds.
- Proceed very gradually repeating each step until your dog shows no signs of distress. If at any time in this process your actions produce an anxiety response in your dog, you've proceeded too fast. Return to an earlier step in the process and practice this step until the dog shows no distress response, then proceed to the next step.
- When your dog is tolerating your being on the other side of the door for several seconds, begin short-duration absences. This step involves giving the dog a verbal cue (for example, "I'll be back,") leaving and then returning within a minute. Your return must be low-key: either ignore your dog or greet him quietly and calmly. If he shows no signs of distress, repeat the exercise. If he appears anxious, wait until he relaxes to repeat the exercise. Gradually increase the length of time you're gone.
- Practice as many absences as possible that last **less than ten minutes**. You can do many departures within one session **if your dog relaxes sufficiently between departures**. Scatter practice departures and short-duration absences throughout the day.
- Once your dog can handle short absences (30 to 60 minutes,) he'll usually be able to handle longer intervals alone and you won't have to work up to all-day absences minute by minute. The hard part is at the beginning, but the job gets easier as you go along. How long it takes to condition your dog to being alone depends on the severity of his problem.

Interim Solutions

While training, you should try to avoid leaving him alone to practice the anxiety behavior. You could try taking your dog to a doggy daycare, a neighbor or family member's home, or to work with you if possible.

What Not To Do

- Punishment: if you punish your dog after you return home, it may actually make things much worse.
- Get another pet: this sometimes helps, but you may wish to try it out with a friend's dog to make sure first!
- Crating: this often makes the anxiety worse. Your dog may urinate, defecate, howl in the crate or even injure himself in an attempt to escape from the crate.

Basic Training is always a good idea, but it won't directly help an anxiety problem. Home alone anxiety is not the result of disobedience or lack of training. It's a panic response.

Need more help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.