



Veterinary House Calls
5131 Corners Dr.
West Bloomfield, MI 48322
(248) 254-1724

Master

SEPARATION ANXIETY TREATMENT PROTOCOL

- During treatment for separation anxiety, it would be best not to allow your dog to experience anxiety during your departures. So, apart from the very defined and controlled training departures, your dog would not be left alone. Doggie day care or taking your dog to work are options for people that must work outside the home. If you are unable to avoid anxiety-ridden departures, you should make a clear distinction between "safe" training departures and other departures that will most probably evoke the anxiety. The most effective way to do this is to leave the dog in different locations for the training versus nontraining departures. Alternatively, a sound cue can be used to differentiate training from nontraining departures.
- Most dogs become anxious as you go through preparations for departure. Therefore, you must work on desensitizing your pet to your predeparture cues. List your predeparture cues (e.g., pick up keys, put on shoes, etc.) that trigger anxiety in your pet. Then start to perform these randomly when you do not intend to leave. Do not overwhelm your dog to the point of eliciting anxiety; just do a few a day at an intensity level that your dog can handle.
- Many dogs with separation anxiety are very attached to their owners. Making them more independent is a useful adjunct to the treatment plan. To increase your dog's independence when you are home, do not allow your dog to follow you everywhere. For example, instead of sitting right next to you while you are relaxing at home, have the dog sit a few feet away from you. Or when you go up to go to the bathroom, don't allow the dog to follow you. To achieve this gradual independence, you can use sit/stay commands, tie-downs (a leash attached to a sturdy piece of furniture), or close doors. The key is that you want to progress gradually enough so that you don't elicit the anxious response from your dog. If you do happen to progress too rapidly and your dog exhibits anxiety, just return to a comfortable level and progress more gradually.
- If you are using a crate during training departures, you first want to acclimate your dog to being in the crate when you are at home. Do one to two sessions per day. Start by putting your dog in the crate with a tasty treat and then sitting in the same room for a short period of time (a few minutes) perhaps reading a book. Release your dog from the crate. Gradually increase the duration of the sessions until your dog is comfortable in the crate for 30 minutes when you are in the room. Then start to leave the room, initially just for a very short period. Gradually increase the duration of your room departure until you can be elsewhere in the house for 30 minutes while your dog is comfortably resting in the crate. How quickly you progress will depend upon your dog. You do not want to elicit anxiety (panting, whining, barking, escape attempts, destruction, etc.) from your dog.
- If crate training your dog is not possible, train your pet to settle and relax in a safe location. See the Tranquility Training Exercises handout for more details.

- When you must leave, keep departures and returns low key. Ignore the dog for 5–10 minutes prior to ALL departures and whenever you return. Always take your dog out for an elimination opportunity prior to your departure.
- Exercise is important for the health of any dog. Try to provide daily exercise for your dog, ideally prior to your departures.
- On training departures only, present the dog with a new signal or cue or leave them in a novel location. This can be the radio or television left on, spraying air freshener, or ringing a bell. Always use the same signal on all planned departures.
- Give the dog a delicious but long-lasting food item to consume in your absence. Toys stuffed with food work best.
- **Departure Desensitization:** This is the critical part of the behavioral modification program. You need to start with short departures and gradually increase their length. A videotape of your dog during a departure can help you to see the length of departure that is “safe”—the amount of time that you can be absent before your dog starts to show signs of anxiety. Most dogs become anxious very shortly after the owner’s departure. When you start to actually leave the home, you should start with safe departure times and then gradually increase departure length. An example of a departure schedule is 1 minute, 1 minute, 1 minute, 3 minutes, 2 minutes, 3 minutes, 4 minutes, 5 minutes, 5 minutes, 1 minute, 5 minutes, 7 minutes, etc. There is an occasional shorter departure so that your dog doesn’t start to anticipate your departure length. Of course, the departure schedule needs to be tailored to your dog. You may find that your dog needs fewer or greater number of trials at each departure length. Usually, after you have successfully completed the first 30 minutes of departure, you can increase the departure lengths by greater increments (1 hour, 1 hour, 1.5 hours, 1.5 hours, 2 hours, etc.). Remember that your dog can hear your car and knows if you have truly left. Even during the 4-minute departures, you will have to actually drive away! When your dog has achieved relaxation at a departure duration that is typical of your routine departures, your dog has successfully completed the program and should be left in the training departure location for your routine departures.
- If at any time your dog exhibits anxiety or you return to find signs of destruction/elimination, then you have progressed too quickly. Return to a “safe” departure time and progress more gradually.
- Never punish your dog for behavior that has happened in your absence. This behavior is a result of anxiety, and punishment will probably make your pet more anxious.
- Vary the time of day that you practice planned departures.
- Progress through the schedule of planned departures gradually. Do not increase the time away in a regular progression and never increase the time if the dog has engaged in any separation-related behavior while you were gone.