



## Pet Health Information from Milford Animal Clinic

# Protocol for Dogs with Separation Anxiety

Dogs with separation anxiety traditionally destroy objects in the house, destroy sections of the house, or urinate, defecate, vomit, or salivate when they are left alone. The amount of time that they can be left alone without these problems can be very variable. In profound cases of separation anxiety, dogs can be left alone for no more than 10 or 15 minutes before they panic and exhibit these behaviors associated with anxiety.

In many cases of separation anxiety the inappropriate behavior is only apparent after a schedule change. For instance, the dog may be fine until 5:30 or 6:00 P.M., when the owner is accustomed to coming home. If the owner's schedule changes and now he or she is not home until 7:30 P.M., the dog may start to panic at 6:00.

There are idiopathic changes that occur in some older dogs and, for no apparent reason, a dog that has been able to be left alone all its life can no longer be left alone.

In some cases the fear of being left alone can be associated with horrific events. These events include being caught in a fire, being in the house when a burglary was attempted, or being in the house when an alarm system sounded. In these situations, dogs may have a worse experience than dogs for whom separation anxiety develops more gradually and may benefit at the outset from stronger medications.

Dogs that are at risk for separation anxiety include those rescued from humane shelters, those rescued from laboratory situations, those rescued from the street, and those that have spent extended periods in kennels or with one older housebound person.

The following steps are designed to teach these dogs that they do not have to be fearful and that they do not have to have panic attacks when they are left alone. Remember, the dog's separation anxiety can be extremely variable, although most dogs respond by having a smaller space where they can feel secure, some dogs panic at being put in a crate. If the dog panics when put in an enclosed space, no matter how airy the crate or what type of room, do *not* force the dog to be crated. This will only make the situation worse.

## Step 1

The first step of this program – designed to teach dogs to not be anxious when left alone – involves teaching the dog the first tier of the behavior modification program. This program is designed to teach the dogs to “sit”, “stay”, and “relax” while the client does a variety of behaviors, some of which may be upsetting to the dog, in a benign and protected circumstance. When the dog can perform all of these behaviors perfectly for everyone in the household in each room in the house without reacting and perform them outside without reacting, the dog is then ready to start the second tier of the behavior modification program. For the dog with separation anxiety, the second tier of the behavior modification program involves teaching the dog to be left alone for gradually increasing increments of time. Until the dog is absolutely ready for that program, it would be best if the dog were not left alone. Because some dogs react inappropriately only when one person leaves the house, it would be optimal if that individual could take the dog to work. If that is not possible, having a dog sitter in the house or putting the dog in a kennel during the day are other suggestions. If the dog must be left at home, it is best to put the dog in either a crate if it is comfortable there or in a small isolated area. This is discussed in the following step. In addition, it is critical that the animal respond to programs designed to support and encourage deferential behavior throughout the day. Remember that dogs with separation anxiety are anxious. They are not anxious only when they are left alone – they are probably anxious in a variety of contexts, and it is important to teach them to relax at any opportunity you get. The more you can make their relaxation behaviors generalized to everyday life, the better. It is critical that both programs to teach deferential behavior and programs to teach the dogs to take all cues as to the appropriateness of their behavior are practiced minimally twice each day for 15 to 20 minutes by every member in the household. If there are several household members, each person can practice once a day, but each person *must* practice at least once a day. If everybody practices twice a day, the dog's behavior will improve more quickly. The harder you work and the more intensely you work, the better.



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### Step 2

Crate the dog or isolate it in a small room when you are not at home. Ensure that the crate and the room are puppy-proof (i.e., no dangling cords, no uncovered electrical outlets, no open areas of water, such as a toilet, in which a pet can drown). Make sure that the dog has a blanket or bedding, water, toys, and a biscuit. Never leave a loose collar, a Gentle Leader/Promise System Canine Head Collar, or any other head collar on a dog while it is in a crate. In fact, it is probably best to remove buckle collars while crating dogs because any dog can catch any collar on a crate and potentially strangle to death. This may be particularly true for an anxious dog that constantly moves around. Anything that can be destroyed should be removed from the room and, if necessary, acrylic plastic sheets can be placed against the walls so that if the animal becomes upset, it does not do any further damage. Once the dog starts to do damage, it is possible that this will become a self-perpetuating cycle. *Never use the crate as punishment.* Crates and safe rooms must be areas where the dog is content and feels secure.

### Step 3

Make sure that the crate or safe room is in a brightly lit, temperature-controlled area. No dog will enjoy being thrown in a dank, dark garage just because that is the easiest place to clean up. Leave a television or radio and lights on for the dog while you are gone, and make sure that there is a signal that will tell the dog 15 to 20 minutes before you are going to return that you will be returning. You can place an additional light and radio on a timer. If the dog can learn to respond to this through short departures over the weekend, you can use it in the behavior modification program. You can try this by setting a light and timer and coming into a room where the dog is sitting and relaxing for short periods. Every time you come in, the light should come on. Every time you leave, reset it. If you can work up to 15 or 30 minutes, you may be able to use this as a signal throughout the day that you will be coming home.

### Step 4

If you are unable to get a pet sitter, you can have somebody come into the house to visit the dog during the day. This works well particularly for dogs that can go 3 hours but not 4 hours without attention. In some cases dogs are fine when left alone in cars, but they are not fine in homes. Do not leave the dog alone in the car unless you are positive the dog will not destroy it. For some people, being able to take the dog and leaving it in the car is an option. It may not work for everybody and, until you know how the dog is going to behave, it would be inappropriate to subject the dog to an entire day in a vehicle. It is also inappropriate to subject dogs to this if you live in climates that are either too hot or too cold. Remember that when it is 80° F, the inside temperature in a car often reaches 140° F to 160° F. Dogs can die within minutes at such temperatures.

### Step 5

Regardless of how the dog behaves to timer desensitization, set a light on a timer so that it will come on 30 minutes before you come home. This acts as a first cue for the dog.

### Step 6

Some dogs behave best if they can observe the outside world. If your crate can be *placed* by sliding glass doors or if you have an outdoor run that is sturdily enclosed, including a roof, and no one can steal or abuse the dog, some dogs do much better if they are outside. This is an option worth investigating. It is not a substitute for behavioral therapy but can be an adjuvant to it.



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### Step 7

Identify cues that make your dog realize that you are about to leave. These are usually cues such as putting on makeup, grabbing your briefcase, dressing in a suit, getting up at 6:00 AM, and putting on work clothes immediately, and picking up your keys. Desensitize the dog to any of these cues. For example, pick up your keys but do not go anywhere, put on makeup and high heels on the weekend, leave for work wearing a jogging suit, use a different door than you usually do, change your pattern of things that you do before leaving. Start to water the plants before you leave instead of rushing out the door. Anything to decouple the cues the dog uses as a signal for your departure from the dog's actual initiation of anxiety-based behaviors (these include pacing, panting, whining, pupil dilation, movement of ears, frequent solicitation of attention, hiding, and jumping up and down in solicitation of behavior) will help. If you work intently on these for several weekends, you can uncouple the cues in a relatively short time.

### Step 8

Finally, most of these dogs require some form of antianxiety medication to improve. Most antianxiety medications have rather limited side effects and have tremendous benefits. After you finish the first tier of the behavior modification program, your dog will begin the second tier designed to get the animal to not react to gradual departures. At that point, the need for medication can be reassessed, but starting a regimen of antianxiety medication provides real benefits at that time.