



Managing Separation Distress

Separation distress occurs when a dog feels distress or anxiety in direct response to being left alone. This is a common canine behavior, as dogs are highly social animals. Separation distress varies in severity and presents in many different ways, including whining, barking after departure, chewing, and increased excitement (i.e., jumping, panting, pacing) surrounding departures.

Separation distress is different than separation anxiety, which is a panic disorder that generally presents with more severe symptoms. Symptoms of separation anxiety include consistently urinating/defecating when left alone, extensive property damage to exits (doors or windows), self-injurious behavior, and excessive drooling. If you suspect your dog is suffering from separation anxiety, please reach out to a positive reinforcement trainer or a Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer (CSAT) who is skilled in treating this condition.

What You Can Do About Separation Distress

- **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 they have time to settle down.
- **Provide a food or puzzle enrichment item (such as a Kong) before you leave.** Make sure to give them these puzzles at other times during the day as well so they do not begin to associate the food with your absence. Start off introducing the Kong or puzzle easily by just putting treats inside that will easily fall out. Once your dog is a pro, you can start packing in wet food/peanut butter/freezing the Kong so the dog must work for the food inside. Eventually, they will be a Kong expert and spending long periods of time working to get out the goodies. Check out our website for a more in-depth guide to canine enrichment!
- **Make your departures and returns completely calm and emotionless.** Refrain from huggy/kissy scenes! If your dog gets excited and jumps all over you when you return, ignore them. Turn your back or walk away. When they finally settle down, say hello and greet them calmly.
- **Mix up the pieces of your departure routine as you are leaving and when you are not leaving.** The goal is to stop the dog's distress building to a fever pitch as they recognize your departure cues. Eat breakfast before you shower instead of after. Pick up your keys, and then put them back down. Get dressed, then sit on the couch. Put on your shoes, then take them off. Make the departure unpredictable both before you leave and periodically when you are staying home.
- **Remove any aversives from your training vocabulary.** Refrain from using choke chains, shock collars, physical or harsh verbal punishment (especially in connection to your dog's distress behaviors). Aversive training methods can increase anxiety around your arrivals and departures by creating negative associations, and ultimately lead to additional behavioral problems or fallout.

Additional resources:

For a more in-depth explanation of separation distress, check out this article:

<https://www.clickertraining.com/node/3291>

For a step-by-step guidebook, you can check out *Don't Leave Me!* by Nicole Wilde

For more information and behavioral support, contact our behavior department at www.eastbayspca.org/behaviorhelp