Separation Anxiety in Dogs

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Behavior Modification Treatment Plan

Begin planned training departures
1. Establish safety signal*: Music, TV, air freshener, novel location
2. Determine minimum departure time based on videotape: Generally very short (1–3 minutes), perhaps only walk to door
3. Departure must be like real departure: If always exit in car, use car for longer departures
4. Place dog in safe area
5. Deploy safety signal*
6. Depart and remain away only for predetermined period of time
7. Return, ignore dog except to matter-of-factly walk for elimination
8. Dog must be calm before repeat. Assess anxiety level of patient, often not practical or helpful to do more than 1 to 3 departures per 24 hours
10. NEVER USE SAFETY SIGNAL ON REGULAR DEPARTURES WITH UNREGULATED LENGTH OF ABSENCES

* • Predictable interactions
  • Command–response relationship; pet earns what it wants
  • Sit/stay when owner leaves room to decrease following behavior
  • Give attention only when pet is calm to decrease attention seeking
  • Teach pet to settle/relax in safe area

† • Leave toy stuffed with delectable food*
  • Be calm: All departures/returns must be low key; ignore dog for 10–15 minutes
  • Use dog appeaser pheromone (DAP) diffuser
  • Add medication after routine blood analysis; use approved formulations: Fluoxetine (Reconcile; elanco.com) or clomipramine (Clomicalm; novartis.com)**

* • Uncouple cues from departure: Act as if departing WITHOUT doing so; continue normal, nondeparting activities. Goal: Dog no longer responds to cues with anxiety. Dog calm before beginning each time. Increasing anxiety possible in some animals with multiple sessions in same day. If noted, owner should consult veterinarian.

** • Recheck: Diminished following behaviors? No anxious responses to departure cues?
  Yes
  Continue behavior modification treatment plan
  No
  Uncouple cues from departure: Act as if departing WITHOUT doing so; continue normal, nondeparting activities. Goal: Dog no longer responds to cues with anxiety. Dog calm before beginning each time. Increasing anxiety possible in some animals with multiple sessions in same day. If noted, owner should consult veterinarian.

• Other causes ruled out by investigation and/or videotape?

Yes

No

Evidence of attachment and following behaviors?

Yes

No

Anxiety at departure cues?

Yes

No

Evidence of attachment and following behaviors?

Yes

No

Anxiety at departure cues?

Yes

No

Evidence of attachment and following behaviors?

Yes

No

Anxiety at departure cues?
**Elimination:** House-training issues often occur when owner is present or absent. Verify outdoor elimination and ask about storm or noise phobias/reaction to outside stimuli (eg, deliverymen).

**Vocalization:** Audio- or videotape to identify pitch/frequency to differentiate anxiety from territorial response or noise/storm reaction.

**Destruction:** If animal is destructive both alone and with owner home, videotape to determine if anxiety present and any storm/noise phobias or territorial responses. How soon after departure does destruction occur?

- Must be done at other times as well to avoid toy becoming departure cue.
- A distinctive action owner takes just prior to training departures (eg, putting dog in novel location; out of confinement), employed to help dog associate these departures with quick returns/no anxiety.
- The decision to use drugs should be based on a combination of severity of problem and owner’s tolerance of behaviors. In some cases, medication should be prescribed on first visit. Additional medications (eg, benzodiazepines) prior to departure may be necessary for some animals in addition to daily medication to help with panic and extreme anxiety associated with departure.

**Supportive of separation anxiety**

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<tr>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
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<td>2–3 months of calm behavior when dog is alone/no other anxieties</td>
<td>Begin to wean off medication, commonly decrease 25% a week depending on severity of signs. If anxiety reappears, remain at lower dose to see if dog stabilizes; if not, return to higher dose and maintain for at least 4 weeks. Assess remaining anxiety via videotaping.</td>
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**Not supportive of separation anxiety**

- Other anxiety conditions, sensitivities, or medical conditions causing anxiety or pain

* Use medication and behavior modification until behavior stable/signs of anxiety at departure and during owner absence have diminished/ceased. If anxiety has not diminished after 4–6 weeks, review treatment/potential confounding factors.