



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 Certified Veterinary Behaviorist, an SA Pro Certified trainer, or a Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer (CSAT) who is skilled in working with this condition.

What You Can Do About Separation Distress

- **Exercise your dog well before you leave.** A dog who has had their physical needs met is less likely to try and meet those needs by eating your couch. End exercise sessions 20 to 30 minutes before you go, so they have time to settle down.
- **Use Decompression Walks to lower heart rate.** Studies have shown that in dogs, there is a proportionate decrease in heart rate to time spent sniffing. This means that you have a secret weapon in your arsenal! If you encourage your dog to use their nose as much as possible on walks, you are helping them access their central nervous system, and combat anxiety. For more tips, see our *Decompress for Success* handout!
- **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 *Canine Enrichment* handout for more information!
- **Offer desirable outlets for natural behaviors throughout the day.** Make sure to offer them appropriate outlets so they don't go looking for inappropriate ones! Put some treats in a delivery box and tape it closed with masking tape (or other paper-based tape). Tightly roll a long sheet of cardboard into a "churro" with some peanut butter smudged inside and tape it tight. Nose work

games are another fantastic option. Sprinkle treats or kibble in the grass outdoors or in the yard for your dog to sniff out. Hide some kibble around the house and encourage your dog to “find it!”, increasing difficulty slowly.

- **Dog-proof your living space.** If you are going to give your dog appropriate outlets for their natural foraging and chewing behaviors, make sure to block off areas where you do not want your dog to go and put items away that you do not want your dog to get into (such as shoes). It's all about prevention!
- **Create (or reinforce!) a comforting safe space for your dog.** This can be a well-loved dog bed, an open crate, a specific spot on the couch or by a window, wherever your dog feels most at ease. Equip this space with enrichment to encourage them to relax there. Teach your dog new skills such as “relaxation on a mat” or teach them to LOVE spending time in their crate relaxing through crate training. Check out our Relaxation on a Mat handout for tips!
- **Make your departures and returns completely calm and emotionless.** If your dog gets excited and jumps all over you when you return, simply turn your back or walk away, put away your keys, take off your shoes etc. When they show less intensity, 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.
- **Aim to leave for short sessions about twice per day.** Even if it is just stepping out your front door and right back so it’s “no big deal,” spending a few minutes in the yard, going to the mailbox and back, or walking around the block. We want to start letting your dog know that every time you “leave” isn’t a big deal. Begin to vary the amount of time that you leave your dog alone if they appear relaxed.
- **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. Not only do these methods only address the symptoms rather than the underlying cause of the distress, but can actually make the problem worse by adding stressors to the situation.

Additional resources:

- For a more in-depth explanation of separation distress, check out [this article](#).
- For a step-by-step guidebook, you can check out ***Don't Leave Me!*** by Nicole Wilde.