



Annual Statistics Issue for 2003

From Our President By Kirsten Gleb

Happy Spring everyone! It's that wonderful time of year to get out and romp with the dogs! Be sure everyone has enough water and a place to lie in the shade.

I'd like to send a personal thanks to each of SPDR's breed reps for getting their statistics returned in a timely manner. As the President of this organization, I'm very glad to see so many of these wonderful volunteers choose to renew each year. I've been very happy to welcome a number of *new* breed representatives in the past few months as well, and I'd like to wish each of them the best. Each one of our breed reps and co-reps, along with our many dedicated foster homes and volunteers, is a valuable asset to SPDR. Their contributions of time and energy are what make this organization so strong. SPDR is a wonderful community of generous individuals that I feel very fortunate to work within.

Our annual Volunteer Picnic is coming up on July 18, so dust off your picnic cooler and head to Juanita Park this summer to join us. It promises to be a fun day of potluck, bobbing for hotdogs (for dogs only!), the always-anticipated silent auction, and lots of time to meet fellow volunteers.

I hope to see you all there!

Kirsten

Don't leave me!

What to do about separation anxiety

By Relaeana Sindelar, with input from Mark Gross at PAWS Helpline



We've all seen the photos. Bags of flour dragged across Oriental rugs. Sofas, doors, and shoes with new "decorator chew marks" around the edges. Dog beds emptied of their stuffing, surrounded by what appears to be a blizzard of feathers, foam, or cedar chips.

Sometimes it just makes a dog parent want to cry. Sometimes it brings out the worst in our personalities. And sometimes, it results in the animal being relinquished to a shelter. What's a dog parent to do? Fortunately, there are some solutions.

What Is Separation Anxiety?

Does your dog have separation anxiety? If you've got cause to wonder, the answer may be "Yes," at least at some level.

According to the textbooks, "Canine separation anxiety is the fear or dislike of isolation

which can result in undesirable behavior." According to animal behaviorists, separation anxiety is one of the leading causes of canine behavior problems, resulting in literally hundreds of thousands of desperate calls to trained professionals.

Dogs with separation anxiety may destroy objects, may urinate, defecate, vomit, or excessively salivate when they are left alone, to varying degrees and with varying consistency.

Some dogs only engage in one problem behavior. Others may engage in several behaviors, or change from one type of behavior to another. Every dog afflicted with separation anxiety reacts somewhat differently.

Although the following symptoms may be indicative of other (physical, mental, or emotional) problems in a dog, the typical indicators of separation anxiety include:

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Typical Indicators of Separation Anxiety

- Pacing
- Panting
- Whining, barking, howling
- Pupil dilation
- Hiding
- Jumping
- Becoming depressed and refusing food or water
- Destruction of objects
- Destruction of self (excessive chewing or licking)
- Frequent solicitation of attention
- Excessive and prolonged greeting behavior upon owner's return

The most damage is done when the dog's anxiety level peaks, typically within 30 minutes of the owner's departure. In extreme cases, dogs may be left alone for no longer than 10 or 15 minutes before they panic and exhibit separation anxiety behavior.

Sometimes the anxiety and resulting behavior begin to build while the owner is preparing to leave the home — while the dog's parent is showering, getting dressed, and rattling keys, the dog may start working himself into a state of agitation. The dog may follow the owner from room to room, whimper, shake, or even become mouthy or aggressive as the owner tries to depart.

Once the owner has left, a dog suffering from separation anxiety will often scratch and dig at doors and windows in an attempt to follow his human companion.

Why Do Some Dogs Develop Separation Anxiety?

In a nutshell, it's all about confidence, or more accurately, the lack of confidence. Other factors may include an absence of healthy social attachment(s), an emotional trauma, or time spent living in an unstable "pack" or environment.

While any number of situations can lead a dog to experience separation anxiety, the situation itself is usually not the cause — it's simply the trigger.

The presence or absence of anxiety is related to how the dog responds to stress (or life in general), and this is based on his inherent level of confidence. Two similar dogs may experience the same situation, such as being left at home alone all day, but separation anxiety may only occur in one of them.

Confidence begins to develop in puppyhood, during the pup's first experiences in forming social attachments.

Dogs are social creatures, as displayed by puppies forming social attachments to their mother and littermates. When the mother steps out of the whelping box, the pups turn to each other for comfort, which generates confidence in having "been there for each other" during the first big change in environment.

Likewise, when a pup awakens and finds himself across the box from his littermates, his developing sense of confidence will determine whether he rolls over and falls back asleep, crawls back to the other pups, or becomes transfixed, yelping in terror.

Over time, the puppy's positive social attachments and interactions develop his inherent sense of confidence. He learns his place in the world and how to feel safe in his own skin, whether or not he's in the company of his pack.

Sometimes if a dog has spent an even longer time with its "dog family" or "extended pack" — such as in the case of racing greyhounds, whose first two years are often spent surrounded by other dogs — its first time on its own (in the home of the new adoptive owner) can be a difficult experience despite the dog's age at the time of occurrence.

Once a dog is separated from his original family group or pack, his innate desire for social attachment is transferred to his owner, who can then continue to enhance the puppy's confidence and self-comforting skills through positive interactions, training, and guided introduction to as many experiences as possible. The resulting attachment forms the basis of their relationship and the foundation for a healthy bond between owner and dog. (This human-canine bonding process takes place with newly adopted adult dogs as well as puppies.)

However, when something goes awry in the puppy's confidence development, he will begin to show an extreme dependence on others for safety or comfort.

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Such an intense dependence on others predisposes a dog to separation anxiety. Dogs that seem particularly needy are usually suffering from a real lack of confidence, and require almost constant companionship and/or attention in order to feel secure. As soon as that companionship is withdrawn, they feel desperately alone, a feeling that leads first to panic and then quite often manifests itself in destructive behavior.

Here are a few of the factors that can contribute to a dog's lack of confidence and the ensuing over-dependence on others:

- Premature separation from the mother dog
- Deprivation of attachment early in life (puppies kept in pet shops)
- Traumatic events in a young dog's life (abuse, fire, burglary, or even an alarm system going off)
- Sudden change of environment (new home, a stay at a kennel, abandonment)
- Change in owner's lifestyle that results in a sudden end to constant contact with pet
- Long-term or permanent absence of a family member (divorce, death, child leaving home)
- Addition of a new family member (baby, pet)
- Unstable pack or environment (dogs or human family)

Sometimes a dog will have lived several years with no problem and then suddenly develop separation anxiety. This can be the result of a change in schedule that necessitates the dog being left alone for longer than normal, or an undiagnosed health problem, or even advancing age.

What Can You Do About It?

The trick is to discover which type of separation anxiety treatment is most effective in teaching your dog that he or she does not have to be fearful and panic-stricken when left alone. Don't make the mistake of ignoring the problem,

as one undesirable behavior may simply be replaced with another as the dog searches for an outlet for its anxiety. Most importantly, **DO NOT** punish the dog for anxiety-induced behavior. **Punishment is NOT the answer, and can actually worsen the situation** by making the dog less confident and secure in its world. Punishment such as dragging the dog through the destruction area, giving stern "No" commands, rubbing their nose in the mess, and/or subsequent isolation in a crate, garage, or yard will fail to address the source of the problem, and in fact will heighten the dog's anxiety.

Punishment for the behavior is NOT the answer, and can worsen the situation by making the dog less confident

Following are a number of separation anxiety treatments. If early attempts on your own fail to decrease your pet's anxiety, contact a professional who may be able to point out a critical detail that others less experienced with behavioral disorders may overlook. Your vet and/or an animal behaviorist will be able to help you explore treatment alternatives and get a program started.

1. Confidence Building

Confidence building is often the first, simplest step available to a pet owner, and usually comes in the form of obedience training.

Dogs with separation anxiety are usually anxious in various situations, so it is important to teach them to relax at every opportunity. Behavior modification for dogs with separation anxiety is designed to teach the

dog to "sit," "stay," and "relax" while the owner performs various behaviors, some of which may be upsetting to the dog. The dog is trained to do this exercise with all members of the household, in each room of the house and outside.

Each member of the household should practice training the dog every day. Being consistent in your training schedule is helpful in establishing the dog's sense of having a predictable and stable routine.

If you're looking for a helpful book on the subject, check out "The Cautious Canine — How to Help Dogs Conquer Their Fears." Although the book is not written from a Separation Anxiety perspective, it includes a wealth of understanding and tips about increasing your dog's confidence in a variety of ways. And the best part is, it's a fast read — only 29 pages long, and quite inexpensive.

2. Activities and Exercise

The introduction of a treat-stuffed Kong®, toys, a television or radio, or even an aquarium can comfort a dog in his owner's absence. Separation anxiety can sometimes be relieved if the dog can observe the outside world (e.g., if the dog's pen or room can be placed near sliding glass doors or a window). Although some dogs do better if they are left outside, many dogs find being alone outdoors to be a frightening and over-stimulating environment.

Remember, a dog who is bored will have more time to dwell on the fact that he or she has been left alone, while one who is entertained will have somewhere to focus its energy and attention. Increasing the animal's daily amount of exercise is often the first recommendation a behaviorist will make for a destructive dog — just as exercise releases endorphins in humans that result in a heightened sense of well being, sufficient physical activity plays a vital role in your dog's state of mind.

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3. Choosing Appropriate Space

All dogs, particularly puppies, should have their own special place. Being limited to a smaller space can make a dog feel like he has a safe “den” to go to for a little peace and quiet. This designated space not only helps a dog feel secure, it keeps him safe, and protects your home from accidents and destructive behavior. While some dogs do fine roaming freely about the home, even an adult dog who is housebroken and is not a chewer is often best confined during the initial “getting used to my new home” phase.

You can create a safe space by using a crate, or by confining the dog to one room, or perhaps to one floor of your house. No matter what size of “safe space” you choose, it’s imperative that this place be associated *only* with positive things -- never put the dog in this place as a punishment.

To reinforce the positive nature of your designated safe space, place items such as a fluffy bed, favorite toys, and perhaps a radio or television in the same room. Put some laundry that smells like you in the area (but only items you don’t care about, as these articles may be destroyed if the dog becomes anxious or bored). Old pillowcases or sweatshirts you’ve recently used or worn can be of great comfort to the dog when spending time alone.

If you choose a crate as your dog’s “safe space,” specific steps must be taken to appropriately “crate train” your dog -- getting them accustomed to the crate in gradual, positive steps. Methods for crate training include desensitization, safety cues, and planned departures, all of which are described in #4.

If you choose a room rather than a crate, make sure the room is safe (e.g., no dangling cords, uncovered electrical outlets, or open areas of water, such as a toilet), remove anything in the room that can be destroyed,



and remove the dog’s collar (to prevent strangulation).

When introducing the dog to his new safe space, special treats can help reinforce the area as a positive place. Make a habit of going to the “safe space” whenever it’s time for some extra petting. Consider this the area to give out cookies; you can even toss treats into the crate. For long-term positive reinforcement, stuff a Kong® with small biscuits and peanut butter and toss that into the crate or safe place.

Always use common sense with the amount of time a dog is left in its safe space. While a crate can be helpful in training a puppy, placing an adult dog in a crate for an extended period of time will often worsen separation anxiety -- particularly if the dog has never been crate trained. If your schedule requires you to be away for long periods, have someone visit the dog during the day (described in #6).

As you become confident the dog will behave, you can gradually increase his freedom to other areas of the house, if desired. However it’s important to do this in stages. This is described in more detail in #4 desensitization, but to summarize: the first few times you leave him alone in the new larger area (e.g., uncrated), leave the house for only a few minutes at a time, a few times a day, so he becomes confident that you’ll return, and then gradually increase the away times.

Again, never put a non-crate-accustomed dog into a crate as a solution to separation anxiety. An unaccustomed dog may still engage in anxiety responses while in the crate -- he may urinate, defecate, howl, or even injure himself in an attempt to escape from the unfamiliar tiny space. If you do not have time to gradually accustom your dog to a crate, leaving him in a room or large pen is preferable to extended isolation in a crate.

4. Desensitization

Desensitize the dog to cues that indicate you are about to leave for the day by changing your daily routine. Pick up your keys, but do not go anywhere. Put on makeup on days when you don’t plan to leave the house. Dress up in your jogging suit but stay home. Use a different door.

Above all, don’t make a fuss whenever you must leave! Departure and return should be made as quiet and uneventful as possible to avoid overstimulating the dog.

In particular, do not give extra attention prior to departures nor immediately upon return. Excessive attention during these two critical junctures seems to increase separation anxiety and does *not* make being alone easier on the dog, contrary to what owners might assume. If you make a big production every time you leave, your dog will sense your anxiety over leaving, and may panic because he thinks

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you're never coming back. Try leaving the house without saying a word, and without a backward glance. If you act like it's no big deal that you're leaving, eventually your dog will also see it that way.

Positive "safety cues" help the dog relate to a previous safe period of isolation. To get the dog to associate your leaving with good things, get him focused on something besides your imminent departure, such as a substantial treat (like the aforementioned stuffed Kong®), or leaving the T.V. or radio on, or providing an acceptable chew toy. Make sure the safety cue is not an item the dog already associates with anxiety (such as the shoe they destroyed during the time they were left alone too long).

Another effective safety cue is to place a light on a timer, set to turn on 15 to 20 minutes before you come home. This timer can be gradually adjusted to modify behavior and signal to the dog that you will be returning.

Presently, the most accepted method for treating separation anxiety involves "planned departures" -- gradually adjusting the dog to being alone by exposure to many short departures.

Because the stress response occurs very shortly after the owner's departure (within 30 minutes), the dog should only be left alone for very short intervals at first (seconds to minutes) to ensure the owner returns before the onset of anxiety.

Before the departure period can be increased, the owner must be certain the dog is not stressed. Upon return, observe the dog for signs of anxiety, and avoid engaging in an extended greeting. Hard as it may sound, you should turn your back until the dog calms down -- remember, the idea here is to reward *calm and confident* behavior. Do not give in to your dog's needy and hysterical pleas for attention, no matter how coldhearted this seems at first.

After the short departures have reached the 30-minute mark, the length of time the dog is left can be increased by larger increments. Once the dog can be successfully left alone for 1-1/2 hours, this is typically the threshold at which the dog has become confident for longer away times.

5. Medication

In extreme cases, dogs with severe separation anxiety might benefit from anti-anxiety medication, including dogs with anxiety due to a recent trauma, or those whose owners simply must leave the dog alone for an extended period while separation anxiety treatment is underway. In most cases, drugs do not offer a permanent solution and should be used in combination with other forms of treatment. Consult with your vet for information on the safest and most effective anxiety-suppressing drugs.

6. Pet Sitter or Doggy Day Care

Consider hiring a pet sitter or dog walker, particularly for a dog that does well for a short time but "freaks out" when left alone all day. A trusted professional can check in on the dog, provide some attention and/or exercise, and extend an "emotional bridge" until you return home -- all of which further reinforces a dog's sense of security about his own space. Dogs that have some sort of social interaction and exercise during the day are less likely to be destructive and anxious.

Doggy day care is another increasingly popular choice for busy dog owners, providing dogs with more exercise as well as beneficial socialization skills with other dogs, all under the watchful supervision.

To find a reputable dog sitter, walker, or daycare in your area, contact other dog owners for a referral, search the internet using the terms "dog walker Seattle," or call the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (800-296-PETS) or Pet Sitters International (800-268-SITS) for a referral.

7. A Second Pet

One solution is simply adopting a second dog. If the problem dog is an "only dog," adding a second dog to provide company is sometimes all it takes to eliminate separation anxiety. Choose carefully to ensure the dogs have compatible personalities, so you don't add to the problem. SPDR Breed Reps excel in helping adopters choose wisely.

8. Prevention

When a new puppy or dog is brought home, avoid situations that encourage anxiety. Your dog should slowly become accustomed to staying alone; and should not constantly follow you around. Gradually adjusting to being alone in the house will go a long way toward developing a healthy owner-pet relationship.

Happy Home, Confident Dog

If you think your pet may be suffering from separation anxiety, it is important to take measures to alleviate the problem right away, as separation anxiety problems typically do not simply disappear with time.

Having said that, some younger dogs do outgrow much of their youthful insecurity, and recently adopted adult dogs may learn to relax once it becomes clear to them that they've finally found their "forever home." A stable, loving home goes a long way towards helping a dog that's been bounced around (or worse) to become a happy, confident canine. Careful observation and patience is the key.

Most of all, remember that your dog is not "bad" or "psycho," nor is he trying to make your life miserable, even if it sometimes feels that way. Your dog is merely suffering from a disorder that can be readily treated. The prognosis for recovery is excellent, particularly if you are willing to spend time working with him to help overcome his anxiety and blossom into a self-assured and trustworthy companion. 🐾