

# Texas Veterinary Behavior Services

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## SEPARATION-RELATED DISTRESS

Your dog has been diagnosed with separation-related distress or has certain risk factors for developing this problem. The following steps will help you modify your dog's behavior. In addition, anti-anxiety medication may be prescribed for your dog to facilitate the behavior modification program.

### **Eliminate punishment for inappropriate behavior**

The undesirable behaviors your dog exhibits are rooted in anxiety. The dog should not be punished for these behaviors, as typically this will increase the dog's anxiety associated with your absence and impending return. This in turn will often increase the severity or number of inappropriate behaviors your dog exhibits. In addition, such punishment can be detrimental to your relationship with your dog and interfere with the modification program.

### **Decreasing significance of departure cues**

Most people have a predictable routine through which they progress before leaving the home, particularly for consistent absences such as work or school. Your dog has become very sensitive to this routine and it serves as a signal to the dog that you are about to leave. Certain steps in this departure sequence may be more predictive to the animal than others (e.g. putting on your shoes, picking up car keys, placing the dog in a confinement area, etc.) and result in significant increases in the dog's anxiety. Decreasing the significance of these steps as departure cues will help decrease your dog's anxiety. Altering the sequence of these steps and engaging in these activities without actually leaving will help do this. For example, you may put on your shoes and coat, pick up your car keys and then sit down to watch television. If your dog is typically confined to a room or crate during your absence, this should also occur for short periods when you are home (but only after the dog has completed the appropriate relaxation tasks). This confinement area should not be associated with your departure or the dog may become extremely distressed when placed there.

You can also begin counterconditioning your dog to these cues by pairing the cue with something pleasant such as a food treat. Clicker training is an excellent adjunct to this type of process.

Examples include:

- Pick up your car keys, click, and immediately reward the dog as you put the keys back down.
- Touch the doorknob, click, and reward the dog (but don't open the door).
- Gather up your purse or briefcase, click, reward the dog, and put the item back down.

In each situation, you can repeat the action several times in a row as long as the dog is not becoming progressively more anxious. Alternatively, you can randomly perform the action throughout the day. You should always follow the action with the click and reward.

### **Decreasing arousal during departure and arrival**

Many animals with separation distress engage in elaborate greeting and departure rituals with their owners. These episodes serve to arouse the dog and heighten its anxiety before you leave and reinforce this behavior when you return. Departures and arrivals should be *calm*. Ideally there should be little interaction with your dog for 15-20 minutes before you leave and after you

arrive home. Do not engage in any greeting behavior after your return unless the dog is calm and behaving appropriately. If your dog is agitated, whining, jumping, vocalizing or distressed in other ways, ignore him/her during this time. For some dogs, this may take 20-30 minutes. When you do finally greet your dog, your dog should meet the PACE criteria before you do so.

### **Decreasing attention-seeking behaviors**

Attention seeking behaviors are common in most dogs with separation distress. These often include nudging, jumping and pawing the owner, bringing toys, stealing items and vocalizing. Many dogs also follow the owner throughout the house and may become distressed if separated from the owner even within the home. All attempts the dog makes to gain your attention should be ignored. This may necessitate you actually walking away from the dog or going into another room if the animal is persistent. Any attention your dog receives should be initiated by you and only when the dog is relaxed and behaving appropriately. Additionally, your dog should be rewarded for voluntarily lying down and relaxing away from you. Praising the dog and providing food rewards will help this. Teaching the dog to accept distance from you through gradual stay routines will also be helpful. The dog should be rewarded for staying in place away from you and remaining calm.

### **The PACE program**

The PACE program is designed to help teach your dog to be more responsive to you. It also serves to help you learn to control the dog's reward systems and access to valuable resources. Most importantly, it helps your dog learn emotional control and how to remain calm. This is an important element in establishing leadership and a healthy relationship with your dog. Your dog must meet four behavioral criteria before receiving ANY form of reward. This includes petting, attention, toys, food (both meals and treats), walks, going in or out doors, etc. These criteria include: respond to a cue (e.g. sit), remain calm, remain focused on *you* (e.g. eye contact), and remain outside your personal space. If the dog does meet these criteria, you should not interact with the dog. For example, if the dog does not sit at mealtime when asked, the dog does not receive the food. Walk away and try again later. (See PACE handout for further information.)

### **Systematic desensitization/counterconditioning to departures**

Graduated departures are used to help accustom your dog to remaining calm during your absence. Your dog should be able to remain relaxed while you move about the room and even step out of sight into another room *before* beginning these steps. During these departure exercises, you should leave some type of consistent auditory, olfactory or visual signal to the dog indicating that these are training sessions and not actual departures. This signal is called a safety cue, and it can be a certain blanket, rug, toy, air freshener, etc. This signal should be left for the dog only during these training sessions. Initial departures should be extremely short – just a few seconds. They should be short enough that the dog does not begin showing anxious behavior or engage in destructive or inappropriate behavior. A food treat, Kong stuffed with food, rawhide or other special item can be left with the dog to distract him/her as you depart. Gradually increase the time you are gone during these departures by increments of approximately 50-100% depending on the severity of your dog's symptoms and the speed of progress. For example, if you begin with a 2 second absence, then your next absence should be 3-4 seconds. As your departure time approaches or exceeds one hour, time increments can often be increased by 10-15 minutes. Most dogs can safely be left all day once they are comfortable being alone for 2-4 hours.

During times of stress or changes in routine, your dog may relapse to varying degrees. For example, some dogs show recurrence of symptoms after the owner has gone on vacation or a change has occurred in the owner's daily schedule (e.g. new job). At such times, it will be necessary to once again take your dog through the steps outlined above. Because there may be certain genetic or neurochemical factors affecting your dog's tendency to develop separation-related disorders, it may be necessary to permanently implement some of these steps.