

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training

Separation Anxiety: Prevention and Solutions

What is Separation Anxiety?

Separation Anxiety is a common behavior problem in dogs. Dogs are pack animals, so the stress of being left alone, even for short periods can be overwhelming for some dogs. These dogs may exhibit behaviors such as chew up furnishings and urinating or defecating on the floor due to immense physiological effects of prolonged stress. Dogs with anxiety bark excessively, salivate and drool, and tear down window treatments in an attempt to escape and find their people. There are also cases of dogs chewing or licking themselves.

If the dog is truly suffering from Separation Anxiety, most of his adverse behavior will occur within 15 to 20 minutes of your departure. The possibility of medical problems can cause such behavior and those should be ruled out before safely assume that the dog has Separation Anxiety.

Any or all of these symptoms indicate separation anxiety syndrome if they occur when the dog is left alone. Other signs may include a frantic reaction when his owner arrives home; acts sad or frantic or starts drooling and panting when the person gets ready to leave the house; and or follows his owner and acts clingy much of the time the person is home.

True clinical separation anxiety is not very common. However, many dogs do suffer from anxiety symptoms when they are separated from the people they perceive as their pack.

What Causes Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety can develop in dogs that have previously not spent much time alone; they may have been abandoned at key points in their psychological development. It could be the dog was not properly integrated into their first home and became relegated to the garage or backyard all day, every day. Another reason could be he was removed from mother and littermates too early (prior to 8 weeks of age) or too late (after 14 weeks).

There may have been a traumatic event, such as a frightening experience at a shelter or kennel, or a significant change in their household, such as a new person joining the family, a move to another house, or change in the owner's work schedule. Some dogs tend to become extremely attached to their new person. They become insecure when that person leaves.

Solutions for Separation Anxiety

First, we must remember Separation Anxiety is an instinctive behavior. It is not due to disobedience or lack of training. Overt punishment for the act tends to be unrewarding and can have the opposite effect than desired.

Solution Overview:

The key to treating this problem lies in planning short-term departures, then gradually lengthening them until the dog gets used to your absence. You must practice leaving home for progressively more minutes each day so the dog learns that his family will come back.

Do not react or make coming home an exciting event. Do not fuss over the dog within 5-10 minutes of your arrival. This keeps down the amount of excitement and anxiety levels in your dog to a minimum.

When leaving, eliminate any of your own behavior that might trigger the dog such as rattling your keys, saying goodbye, or making a big deal out of leaving. Instead, casually put a few treats in his food dish; the idea is distract your dog's attention away from the excitement of your departure and create a more comfortable, pleasing situation for him. Once you arrive back home and have been there for a while, then you should offer him more attention.

In addition, when leaving turn on the radio or a music channel on the television, this provides white noise to block out street sounds that become intimidating when you are gone.

Desensitize Departures

Dogs are extremely adept at reading body language. Therefore, your dog can easily tell the difference between going outside to bring in the mail and a longer departure. Your dog will notice cues such as you pre-departure preparations. For example, when collecting your coat and bag, taking out keys, and turning off lights may cause a reaction. Separation-anxious dogs will respond by exhibiting anxiety signals such as whining, pacing, drooling, yelping and/or yipping.

One way to reduce your dog's anxiety about the separation is to "uncouple the cues"; we accomplish this by engaging in pre-departure routines without always leaving the house.

- Put on your coat and rattle your keys other than when you are actually going out.
- Keep grabbing your coat and keys and putting them back down again until your dog does not bother getting excited anymore.
- Now you can start rewarding the dog for NOT responding to the stimulus; this is a form of shaping behavior.

If there is something else that triggers your dog's anxiety over your leaving, such as putting on shoes by a door or switching lights on or off, throw these into the mix as well. This exercise will help desensitize your dog to the anxiety-starters that signal your imminent departure.

Establish a "safety cue"

A safety cue is a word, gesture, action or even a special toy that you teach the dog to associate with the idea that when you leave, you will always come back. Use the safety cue each time you leave the house, starting by cueing it to brief absences (such as taking out the trash or checking the mailbox).

Your safety cue might be gently saying, "take care of the house", "I'll be back", playing the radio or give him a distinctive, safe chew toy (Kong or Nylabone).

Start out using the safety cue during practice sessions. However, to establish the cue as an effective tool, do not use it when you are leaving for longer durations than your dog has learned to tolerate.

Excessive Barking

Some dogs will display their anxiety through barking. When attempting to break your dog of barking excessively, DO NOT yell, scold or physically punish him, as this will only make the problem worse. A dog that is isolated from their guardians for most of the day does not care what kind of attention they get, both positive or negative is attention!

To Crate or not to Crate

Crating your dog is either comforting or produces a panic in a dog with anxiety. First test and see if he is simply annoyed and he needs to get used to the crate, or if he becomes panicked, then crate is not a good idea. Signs of panic can be excessive barking and whining; if your dog is drooling or frothing at the mouth, or biting the crate (some dogs will injure their nose and mouths trying to get out of the crate) they are really stressed, so the crate is not a good idea right now.

If the dog is comfortable in his crate, you can start to add calm, quiet verbal praise and an occasional food treat to help him acclimate. Use rewards for being good and calm in his confined area. When you release your dog from the room or crate, do so in a low-key manner; it is best to give no response at all when the dog comes out of the crate for the first minute; this is part of establishing the confined place as a secure den.

If you can crate your dog:

- Make sure the crate is large enough; the crate has to be big enough for him to stand up and turn around comfortably.
- Give your dog a treat he likes when crating, something he only gets when crated. For example, a Kong with peanut butter works well and is safe to leave your dog unsupervised.
- Put a worn t-shirt, something with your scent, inside the crate; this is comforting to your dog.
- It may help to place a sheet over the crate; it will create a safe place. This may be helpful if he is barking, and once the sheet is placed over the crate, it is lights out. Try not to check on him if he is barking, otherwise he learns he can get you to come over by barking!
- A nice warm blanket may help him sleep; some dogs chew the blanket or padding, check and if he is chewing it, remove it from the crate. The dog can swallow material or fibers, which may cause a blockage in the intestinal tract. *Note: if your dog urinates in the crate, do not use a blanket. The blanket is something to urinate or defecate on and still have room in the crate.*
- Do not crate your dog for more than 4 hours during the day; if you are crating at night then it is acceptable to crate him all night. Try leaving the door open and see

if that is more calming than closing the door (some may find the confinement better if the door is open).

- Make sure to let the dog out to potty right before bedtime. As this becomes a routine, the dog should be able to hold his bladder for up to 8 hours.
- Give no response when the dog comes out of the crate. If you give a rousing, jovial response when exiting the crate, it may reinforce the idea that being out is infinitely better than being in the crate. When crate training, you want the dog to think, "This is my special place, and I like it here."

If Crating is not an option:

Create a safe haven for your dog. For the dog's home alone place choose a safe, puppy-proofed room with light and family smells. Ideally, it should be a place or a room where the family resides. If there is no door, block the entrance with a sturdy baby-gate or fencing. The dog should have a bed in an area where he sleeps that is considered "his place."

Once the dog has acclimated and has a secure area where he can be in the pack, you can start to teach him the "Settle" cue.

Toys, Tools and Techniques

Toys

Kong's are a super-durable, safe and multi-functional toy for dogs of all sizes. The manufacturer makes an easy-to-use edible Kong Stuffin', but we find creamy peanut butter works well (about 2 tablespoons). You can also use kibble with peanut butter, cottage cheese, low-fat plain yogurt, and low-fat cream cheese.

The Kong may take his mind off what is causing the anxiety and allow him to refocus on a treat and chew toy. Chewing is a natural activity for dogs; most dogs enjoy this activity and are good for them as long as it is a safe toy. A Nylabone or Kong is the only chew toys that are safe to give your dog while unsupervised.

Tools and Other Options

Increase exercise daily
Find an at home neighbor or pet walker to visit your dog
Come home for lunch
Take your dog to work
Hire a pet-sitter
Doggie day care
Day boarding for dogs who don't play well with others
Change in food to one with lower protein content.

Techniques

The "umbilical cord" technique: It is also used to establish yourself as a leader (the dog follows the leader), it is also useful in potty training.

Put the dog on a 6-foot leash, then attach the leash to your waist, (there are "hands-free" leashes on the internet as well). Keep the dog tethered to you for lengthy periods as you go about the house doing your chores, reading, etc. Usually the dog will like being so close to his person and relax. Over time, the dog will likely want some more space. Do not release him from the leash until he is bored with the umbilical arrangement. Practice this for a week or two; typically, the dog will be happy to be given his own space, which will help with the initial anxiety.

Basics for a Healthy, Happy Dog

Exercise! Exercise! Exercise!

Exercise is important; make sure that your dog gets plenty of exercise in the morning and evening. Consistent exercise helps makes a happy and tired dog!

Provide both physical and mental stimulation:

Give your dog a fun job to occupy your pet when you leave for work. Play Hide-and-Seek; hide small treats around the house to create a food scavenger hunt. First, teach your dog a "find the treat" command. Once he learns the meaning of the command, hide treats in clear view for the first few sessions. Then place the treats in less visible places to challenge and occupy your dog. You can set up a scavenger hunt each morning before you leave for work to provide an engaging distraction for your dog, and help him learn to accept (and even possibly ignore) your departures.

Give your dog adequate exercise and playtime every day. Dogs are social beings, this activity is important not only to channel their physical energy, but also to engage their minds and meet their need for human companionship.

You are working to retrain your dog to listen to you and to be less clingy, aiding your effort to accustom your dog to being alone without getting frantic. Depending on your individual dog and the consistency of your training efforts, you should be able to move briefly out of your dog's sight after a few days.

Obedience training, practiced daily, will help your dog develop confidence by giving her a sense of accomplishment. However, realize that obedience training alone will not lessen separation anxiety. It is part of an overall therapeutic program.

Don't let your dog train you

Remember that dogs tend to do what works, or what seemed to work in their past. If your dog howls, scratches and throws herself at the door when you depart, and then you turn around, re-enter your house and console the dog, you now have reinforced the bad behaviors. These anxious behaviors already are self-rewarding to your dog in that they provide an outlet for the dog's intense anxiety. You do not want to add any more "reward" to these dysfunctional behaviors.

Preventing Separation Anxiety from Developing

Dogs evolved as companions to people, and they are pack animals. However, owners need to help their dogs find a healthy balance between enjoying companionship and becoming sufficiently independent to tolerate being alone for various periods.

People must condition their dogs to stay calm when left alone. To condition means to get the dog used to specific things, situations and events. That is why it is important to practice leaving and returning to the dog frequently, starting when you first bring the dog into your home and family.

Teach your dog from the start that your leaving the house is an ordinary, regular event. Help your dog build tolerance for your departures and absences.

Rotate the safe chew toys that you give your dog each day. Also, include so interactive toys in the mix, such as Kongs and Buster Cubes.

Next, leave the room for increasingly longer periods.

Realize that this important acclimation training will take some time and patience; you will need to repeat these activities for a few days in the effort to anxiety-proof your dog.

Next step: leave the house and come back in right away. Progressively lengthen these outings until you can know that your dog displays no anxiety about your departures, which means she realizes that when you leave her, you always eventually return.

Gradually increase the duration to 15 minutes, 30 minutes, etc. Conditioning will help any anxiety and will help her accept your absences as a normal part of life. She will learn to be confident that you will return; she will see you as the pack leader who decides what happens and when.

Monitor her progress and stay in range the first few days of this acclimation exercise so that you can tell if your dog shows signs of anxiety.

If at any point your dog begins showing anxiety about your departure, go back to a shorter absence and continue working to build her confidence. After the acclimation phase, you come home and find that your dog experienced anxious behavior (through evidence of scratching, digging, chewing, barking, pools of drool, etc.) decrease the time you leave the dog alone for a while and work to increase the time increments slowly. If your dog

continues displaying anxiety symptoms, cut the time in half again, eventually she will gain confidence.

Alternative Health Aids

Holistic options include valerian root and kava-kava, as well as a number of fear flower essences by Bach. Lavender oil on the dog's collar or bedding can also help.

Rescue Remedy and other gentle, natural ingredient-based remedies are available at most health food stores and over the internet. Many people find that these safe, affordable choices help calm their dogs.

Thunder Shirts work really well for many dogs and can be found on line or in some pet stores.

Professional Help

Consult a veterinarian to check for any underlying medical disorder contributing to a dog's anxiety. Such conditions could include low thyroid levels, improperly functioning adrenal glands or tumors, even injuries.

For dogs with severe clinical separation anxiety, a veterinarian may recommend 8 to 20 weeks of medication to supplement behavior modification techniques. An appropriate anti-anxiety drug should not sedate your dog, but simply reduce his anxiety while you are gone. This is a temporary measure to improve initial response to your behavior modification sessions.

Sources:

Paw-rescue.org

Paw Prints and Purrs, Inc.

<http://www.sniksnak.com/doghealth/sep-anx.html>