



Only wanna be with you!

How to diagnose and soothe dogs with separation anxiety disorder

BY BETHANY W. ADAMS



Rachel Stern/The HSUS

Easy-peasy, I thought. Two-year-old Chihuahua mix Jules had spent his adoption weekend settling in to my apartment, and now I was off to work. I closed the door.

Howls reverberated through the halls.

So began my battle with his separation anxiety, a disorder that can develop when a pet is away from the human or other animal to whom she's most bonded, resulting in a spectrum of behaviors that can include trembling, salivating, excessive vocalization, overgrooming, loss of bladder control, or even minor to major destruction of your home.

“In really simple terms, separation anxiety is just the fear of being left alone and the unknown that follows,” says Dr. Nellie Goetz, veterinarian and Arizona state representative for the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association. “Animals live in the here and now ... so when you leave, as far as they know, you could be gone forever.”

Goetz explains that separation anxiety, as opposed to generalized anxiety or boredom, is unique in when it occurs (as soon as you leave) and in what way it occurs (it's excessive, and your pet's panicked—not casually chewing on a shoe, but tearing through a crate, couch or even wall). It's most often diagnosed in dogs and often surfaces during times of transition.

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In Jules' case, moving from a busy foster home with multiple dogs to my unfamiliar, single-pet apartment was likely part of what triggered it, says Lindsay Hamrick, a certified professional dog trainer and HSUS director of shelter outreach and engagement. When I adopted him seven years ago, recommended solutions included putting Jules in a crate, giving him treats when I left for the day, playing music and ignoring him when I left or returned. The advice is more nuanced today.

Tiring out your dog physically and mentally is key to reducing both boredom and anxiety, says Hamrick, so start with long walks—trying out new routes and allowing lots of sniffing—and then bring out puzzle toys, long-lasting treats (such as a stuffed, frozen Kong or a frisbee smeared with peanut butter) or other enrichment before you leave.

“Anything more interesting than the fact that you're gone,” Goetz says. If it's in the budget, doggy daycare “is fantastic for dogs with separation anxiety” but a dog walker, pet sitter or neighbor checking in midday can also help. (Although it might be tempting, adopting another pet isn't necessarily a silver bullet and can make the situation more complicated, says Hamrick.)

For dogs used to noise, music (one study showed dogs prefer reggae) can help some pets' anxiety but exacerbate others', so play the Bob Marley for a week, and if it's not working, try something else, says Hamrick.

If you try a crate, place it in a comfortable, central area of your home and slowly introduce your pet to “crate time” before you leave him there while you're gone. “If they're objecting to being in the crate, you need to do more work before they can be left in there alone,” adds Goetz.

In cases “where the separation anxiety is so severe that the animal is either doing damage to themselves or doing damage to their surroundings” and your dog needs a crate, your veterinarian may prescribe anti-anxiety medication while you continue to try soothing techniques, says Goetz. “If you can bring

their anxiety baseline down, you will have more success on the behavior modification,” adds Hamrick.

Establishing a routine can also help: “Leave at the same time, come home at the same time. Eventually they develop a level of comfort with [the idea that] you’ve come back before, so you’re going to come back again,” says Goetz.

While Hamrick doesn’t recommend ignoring your pet completely (which is difficult for pet owners to do), she does say you should “keep your departures and your return home as chill as possible” to avoid reinforcing your pet’s anxiety with your own. A certified professional dog trainer can help you neutralize anxiety triggers using positive training techniques.

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For my part, I ditched the crate, walked Jules for an hour before work, hired a daytime dog walker and gave him an exciting treat when I left the apartment—even just to check the mail. As best as I could, I came home at the same time every day. Within a year, I could consider Jules “cured” of separation anxiety. But if I adopted Jules today, I don’t know if I’d be able to spend months coaxing him to relax.

Hamrick and Goetz both emphasize that there’s no shame in recognizing that your pet needs more time, energy or resources than you can give. “Separation anxiety isn’t just challenging for your pet. Your home or lifestyle may not be the best match for your pet or vice versa,” says Hamrick. “Even if you don’t need to rehome or surrender your dog, give yourself permission to feel frustrated and sad that this is happening.”

After this pandemic, many of us will return to work after months of 24/7 togetherness with our dogs. We’ll all be emotionally worse for wear, and we might even feel a little separation anxiety ourselves. It’s not *normal* to be apart from our packs all day, every day, and sometimes, our pets know it—and show it.

It’s unlikely that previously relaxed dogs will suddenly start destroying furniture, says Hamrick, but if your job allows the flexibility, ease the transition by starting with half days in the office.

For your dogs’ sake, you can say, but maybe a little bit for your own sake, too.



Rachel Stern/The HSUS

What about cats?

Although cats are generally more independent than dogs, they're perfectly capable of experiencing separation anxiety, say both Goetz and Hamrick.

Similar to dogs, cats may scratch furniture or walls, repeatedly yowl or meow, or go to the bathroom in inappropriate places when you're gone due to stress and anxiety, says Goetz. And similar to dogs, the "cure" can be as simple as keeping your cat occupied, engaged and ultimately tired out.

Although it is possible to train your cat to walk on a leash, most people don't take their cats for walks, so remember "cats live vertically, not just horizontally." Keep perches or cat trees in your home for them to climb, says Goetz. Just like dogs, cats can also benefit from music (cats prefer classical), puzzle toys, interesting treats, interactive play before work and even having a pet sitter or neighbor check in while you're at work.

High-quality holistic options—like pheromones or other calming supplements—are OK to try, says Goetz, and a veterinarian can also prescribe anti-anxiety medication for severe cases.

"People have a stereotype that cats can just be left alone for 17 hours and are happy that way," says Hamrick. "Cats exhibit anxiety in much more subtle ways. There's probably anxiety happening in cats that isn't recognized or understood," so regardless of your cat's behavior, anxiety-reducing enrichment is always a good idea.