

How Do I Help My Dog With Separation Anxiety?

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Neither you nor your dog wants this constant cycle to continue. It's difficult seeing a beloved pet under so much stress and just as difficult to come home to mayhem and destruction. While there's no magic bullet, there are some things you can try.

Conditioning: In some cases, you can try to relieve his anxiety by teaching him that separation has its rewards. Right now, he's conditioned to go into stress mode when he knows you're leaving him. Try countering that reaction by leaving him a special, like a bone or toy stuffed with peanut butter or something else he loves. You can even leave small treats around the house for him to discover. Make sure his toys, bed, blanket and anything else he likes are near at hand.

If he's a puppy, start conditioning him early by leaving him for short periods of time and gradually lengthening the amount of time you're gone. Some dogs feel safer and more comfortable in their crate when left alone. Watch his behavior in the crate to see if he settles right down or if the anxiety symptoms ramp up.

Exercise: Make sure he gets plenty of exercise, both physical and mental. A tired, contented dog, who's had a brisk walk and playtime with you is more likely to settle down when you leave.

Medication: Sometimes, no amount of training and conditioning will help, especially with older dogs. Some vets recommend medication like amitriptyline, which is used to treat depression, or alprazolam, which is prescribed for anxiety and panic disorders.

Herbal & homeopathic treatments: Another option is natural supplements and homeopathic treatment. Natural supplements that help ease anxiety in dogs include the amino acid L-theanine, chamomile, passionflower, St. John's Wort and valerian. These basically function to alter neurotransmitters in the brain (such as serotonin, GABA, or dopamine) to induce a sense of peace and calm.

In moderate to severe cases of separation anxiety, you might have to try a combination of medication and behavioral therapy. It can be a complicated process, so consider working with a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist or a veterinary behaviorist.

Separation anxiety isn't always preventable, despite your best efforts. But with patience and care, you may be able to reduce your dog's suffering and the destructive behaviors it causes.