



Your experts in compassionate care, here for you and your pet every step of the way

Separation Anxiety

With the vaccines slowly rolling out we are itching for a return to normalcy and hopefully it's in our sights! We are starting to prepare for a return to offices and, dare we say, social lives?!

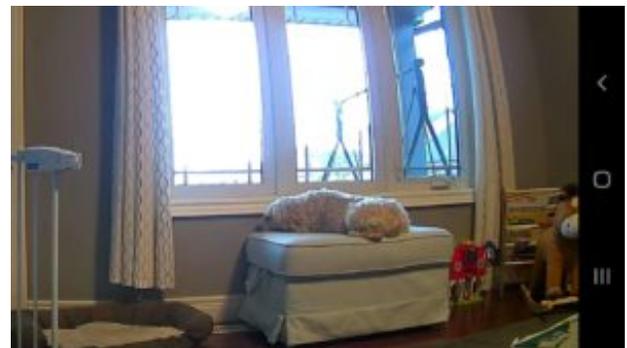
During the past year many of us have been home way more than we ever were in our life before COVID-19. But for many dogs, this extra time with their people has been what they have always wanted and this change may be hard on them. If you got a puppy during the pandemic, they may have only ever known a life with their people around all the time!

Though some dogs will adjust to more alone time easily, others may have a very difficult time and may show signs of separation anxiety. It may be hard to predict which category your dog will fit into and so we recommend starting to prepare your dog ahead of time.

First step: determine your dog's level of anxiety when you leave. The easiest way to do this is with video! If you have a security camera already set up in the house this is obviously a pretty easy step. Simply leave and watch the monitor to see what happens. If you don't then the next easiest step is to set up a video camera or your cell phone to record and watch the video when you return. If your dog settles within 5 minutes or less of you being gone then you likely have little cause for concern but it would still be good to do some "dress rehearsals" of leaving for longer periods before you start leaving them alone for extended periods on a daily basis.



Halladay's owners have a camera that allows them to know how he copes with when they leave. In the first few minutes he waits at the window for him.



Within a few minutes he settles nicely and goes to sleep. This indicates that he is able to cope well with his owners leaving.

If your dog seems to struggle to settle and shows signs of stress and anxiety such as excessive panting, pacing, vocalizing (barking or whining) then you may need to engage in a desensitization program to help them adjust.

Desensitization means introducing a stimulus at a low enough level that it doesn't elicit a stress response. For example, if you have a dog with a specific noise phobia you would start with the noise at a very low level and gradually increase the decibels over time. With separation anxiety, the stimulus in question is you leaving. We have outlined an example of a basic desensitization program below but please note that your dog may need more steps depending on their level of anxiety. They may also move through steps at different rates, moving through some quickly and then struggle with others. If you think you have moved up a step too quickly, don't hesitate to backtrack and work back up more slowly. You need to work at your dog's pace, trying to push them too quickly will likely end up slowing the process in the long run. It's also easier to do this program now, while you're still home the majority of the time; once you return to work you will have no choice but to leave for long periods, making a desensitization program much more difficult!

If your dog shows extreme signs of stress such as destructive behaviour to the house or even themselves, or if they are failing to progress through steps, please contact us to discuss a consultation to determine if we can help tailor a program or discuss anti-anxiety supplements or medications. We are here to help if you have any questions or concerns for your pet!

An example of a step-by-step desensitization program for separation anxiety:

- Start your leaving ritual (packing a purse, bag, or briefcase, putting on your coat, grabbing your keys) but don't actually leave. Dogs will see you doing these things and already start anticipating your departure, ramping up their anxiety. Practice getting ready and then put it all back. Do this a few times per session.
- Start your leaving ritual, open the door and leave but immediately return.
- Add on to steps 1 and 2 by slowly increasing the time you are gone by a few seconds initially and gradually increase the time interval. Intersperse shorter absences as they build confidence.

Other helpful tips:

- A tasty treat distraction such as a stuffed Kong can be helpful but if your dog is particularly anxious, be sure to use the treat during non-stressful events as well, otherwise you could poison the treat against your pet (when they see the Kong show up, they know you're going to leave so it's no longer rewarding)
- White noise or calming music can be helpful but, similar to the "poisoned" treat, avoid only using this music or noise when you leave. It's also helpful if you have a program that can be designed to not play through the entire time in order to give your dog an auditory break.

- Try not to make too big of a deal of leaving the house or coming back in. Your dog will read off your stress before your leave or your excitement coming home. Try to reflect that coming and going is nothing to be overly excited about.
- Never punish your dog for any destructive behaviour or house soiling while you were away. These behaviours were done out of stress, not spite (or in some cases, boredom, in which case, they need to be provided with better stimulation, not punishment). Punishment will not only not help, it may actually add to their anxiety.