

Separation Anxiety

Tips for dealing with Separation Anxiety, excerpted from www.greytalk.com.

Tip # 1

Invest in a Kong or two (at pet stores), it will become your best friend. Fill the Kong with goodies- dog cookies, etc and seal with peanut butter, cream cheese, or plain yogurt. I found that Dempsey had fewer pooping accidents if we did not use kibble in the Kong. Give your dog the Kong every time you leave him/her alone and pick it up again as soon as you get home. You can even freeze the Kong so that it lasts longer. Your dog will learn to associate your departure with getting a yummy treat. It took some time, but Dempsey now gets excited when he is left alone- because he know he's getting a treat!

Tip # 2

If you crate your dog, do not crate only when you leave him/her alone. Crate your dog while you are in the room watching television, cleaning, or doing whatever. You may want to even consider feeding your dog in the crate. Give treats in the crate. If you only crate when leaving your dog home alone, she/he will learn to associate the crate with being home alone- not what you want! Make the crate a positive place to be.

Tip # 3

Do not, do not, do not make a big deal out of coming and going. If you spend a lot of time loving on your dog before leaving or when you first arrive home, s/he will get excited and think it's a big deal. You want your dog to learn that you leaving or getting home is nothing to be excited about. Before you leave, ignore your dog for about 15 minutes. Do not give attention, pet, etc right before you leave. Also, when you get home, ignore your dog for about 10 - 15 minutes. I know this can seem really mean, but it is best for your dog in the long run. In addition, it is probably a good idea to act neutral as well when your dog is going along with you so she/he continues to think departures are no big deal.

Tip # 4

Obedience class can help build confidence a lot. We took an 8 week class over the summer and the instructors were pretty surprised by how Dempsey really came out of his shell and quit cowering behind me. And hey, it can't hurt to have a dog who knows how to sit and stay! Make sure you practice at home as well. Practicing commands can be a nice way of bonding with your dog, increasing confidence, and tiring him/her out before you leave!

Tip # 5

Does your dog try to be in constant proximity of you? It may seem cute and sweet but do not encourage it. Dempsey used to have to have some part of his body always touching mine. Made it pretty difficult to even go to the bathroom! Gradually work on putting some physical distance between you and your dog- scoot away on the couch or sit in a different chair. If your dog constantly has to be touching you, how will you make it to work? Dempsey used to follow me up and down the stairs constantly- he couldn't be alone in a room for even a few seconds! (This may not be unusual when your dog first arrives, but when it continues, it can be a problem). Work on this as well- go to the bathroom alone and shut the door all the way, go upstairs, etc. Work on being out of sight of your dog, increasing the amount of time you are in different rooms from each other.

Tip # 6

Where does your dog sleep? If she/he sleeps in your bed, you might want to consider a doggie bed. Put your dog's bed next to yours or in the same room and encourage the dog to sleep there. (I know this is hard, especially during winter since Greyhounds sure are warm!).

Tip # 7

Does your dog have problems with defecating or urinating in the house or crate? This was the part of Dempsey's separation anxiety that stuck around the longest. Nothing seemed to work. I moved his bed to the area (right in front of the door) where he kept pooping. He would just go on top of his bed and finally ruined the bed. What helped the most was to feed him in this spot and keep his dishes there. It's a pain since it's right near the door, but it was SO worth it! Make sure you clean the area as best as you can so there is no remaining smell to encourage future peeing or pooping. Take the dog out of the room while you clean (and light some candles for your own benefit!). Also, make sure you have learned your dog's schedule and when he/she needs to actually go (usually about 20 minutes or so after eating, if you feed commercial kibble) and give him/her an opportunity to go.

Tip # 8

The window blinds or curtains can be important to consider. I used to always leave the blinds open, thinking it would reassure Dempsey to see outside. Although this does work for some dogs, it was not for Dempsey. As soon as I started leaving the blinds closed, he did better. Now, if he wants to see outside, he peaks around the edge of the blinds. I live in an apartment building and the windows face the parking lot. With people constantly coming and going, I think it was just too much excitement for him!

Tip # 9

Do not be afraid to ask your vet about medication. Dempsey was on Clomicalm for about 5 months. One month's supply is about \$35. After about 4 months, I cut the dose in half and after another month, he was completely off of it. He showed no side effects whatsoever from the Clomicalm. If you do decide to use this medication, expect up to a month or two to see effects. If Clomicalm doesn't work, there are other medications available. Rescue Remedy is another thing to consider and is safe as well (available at GNC). Our holistic vet gave us a combination of Bach remedies and this seemed to help as well. If you are not satisfied by the response from your vet, go on to another one!

Tip # 10

Try leaving a piece of clothing that you have recently worn with your dog. Your scent may help to keep him/her calm. Favorite stuffed animals may also help calm your dog. Even an old shoe might help. Dempsey loves to carry shoes around and sleeps with his nose in them (gross, I know, but he doesn't chew!).

Tip # 11

Exercise!! Increase your dog's amount of exercise- a tired dog is a sleeping dog! And exercise is good for you, too! I know that in the morning, it can be difficult to increase exercise and still allow the recommended 2 hours before/after feeding. Do the best you can. (Here is where obedience classes help, you can just practice commands as extra exercise!).

Tip # 12

Are there cues that signal your departures? Mess with these. Carry your keys around and jingle them, carry your purse around, put your shoes on, put some make-up on (but don't leave!). I sometimes shower at night and sometimes in the morning- just to confuse Dempsey. I put my make-up on at work and don't blow-dry my hair very often. Dogs pick up on these cues and try to predict when you'll be leaving. Dempsey used to sit on the couch with pure panic on his face when I got out of the shower in the mornings (and it wasn't from the towel on my head!).

Tip # 13

Try leaving the TV or radio on when you leave your dog behind. The noise can help keep outside noises at a minimum and also be comforting to your dog. I quickly learned that Dempsey didn't like being alone in the dark (weird dog), so I leave a light or TV on when I go somewhere at night.

Tip # 14

I make sure that the volume on my answering machine is off when I leave. When I am home and it goes off, Dempsey gets excited. It is probably confusing to dogs to hear their owner's voice, but not be able to find him/her!

Tip # 15

Does your dog like toys? Leave several out each day, but vary them day to day so he/she gets different ones each day.

Tip # 16

Do you need other people to talk to about this? There is now a mailing list at www.egroups.com called k9sepanx for humans who have dogs with separation anxiety. A great place to get new ideas from or just vent!

Tip # 17

Keep a journal. Since Dempsey's main problem after his anxiety had decreased some, was pooping every time he was left alone, I had to vary his diet and when he ate. Keeping track of everything he ate, when, how much, etc and writing down messes/getting into things, etc really helped me pay attention to what I was doing.

Tip # 18

Do you have access to a video camera? Stick it out of reach of your dog and have it record while you are gone. Usually, if the dog is going to do something, it is within the first 30 minutes or so of departure. Actually being able to see what your dog is doing might give you some insight into what to try.