

ABTC ADVICE: Helping your dog cope with the lifting of lockdown?

For most of the past year, your dog has been by your side practically every minute of the day, but what is going to happen when life gets back to normal and you go back to work or even just go to visit friends? When this happens, your dog will have to go back to spending time alone. Will this mean that your dog develops a separation related problem? Not necessarily – it all depends on the resilience of the individual dog. However, whilst you are still spending time at home, there are some things that you can do that will lessen the chances of your dog developing this disorder.

Is it separation anxiety?

Separation issues can be quite complex and often require the assistance of a behaviour expert (recommended¹) since some forms of separation can be linked to health issues, sound sensitivity, attachment to a particular household member, certain times of day/night, even boredom and frustration can trigger a problem.

However, broadly speaking, you can ascertain whether or not your dog will become upset when alone or whether s/he will just curl up on her bed like s/he used to do before lockdown. This is really easy to do. All you need is a tablet, laptop, phone or camera and wi-fi.

- Set up your device showing you the area where the dog normally spends their time – get as wide a picture as you can showing you as much area of your home as your device will allow. Use more than one device if you can.
- Use a video conferencing app such as Zoom or Skype, do the same on your phone and leave the house for no more than half an hour and watch what your dog does. Remember, if using a tablet, laptop, or a phone, to turn off your audio and visual so that the dog can neither see nor hear you, as to do so may cause them stress.
- Please don't be tempted to speak to them when they are alone in the house. If your dog wanders back to their bed or resting place and goes to sleep then you can assume that all is well. If, after a few minutes of being unable to settle, s/he starts to become anxious then return home.

¹ Look for a qualified behaviourist at www.abtcouncil.org.uk

- Howling, barking, pacing, toileting, salivating, destroying things or generally looking distressed are all signs of quite strong emotions that could be linked to separation and will require the assistance of a professional. **Please see the Help section below.**

It is important that you do not tell your dog off if s/he has chewed anything, been noisy or made a mess. Doing so would only increase their anxiety and make matters worse.

Changes in Behaviour

Any sudden changes in behaviour can be an indication that something is amiss. If your dog suddenly starts behaving in a way that is not normal for them and that is out of character, there will be a reason – it may be behavioural but it may also be medical. Your first port of call is to the vets for a full examination to make sure that there is nothing medically wrong. Ring your vet first to make an appointment as veterinary services are still restricted. If the vet gives the all clear, then you may wish to seek help from a behaviourist at this point, **please see the section below on Help.**

You should also consider whether the behaviour change is due to boredom. During lockdown our dogs may have had less exercise and stimulation than normal. Make sure that they have enough exercise and mental stimulation – get some puzzle toys, teach your dog to ‘find it’, do some training and when you are out leave them some appropriate things to do – a nice cardboard box stuffed with paper and treats to rip up and find or hiding food around the home for them to search out.

The importance of both physical *and* mental exercise cannot be over-emphasised, no matter how large or small your dog

What next?

You have taken your dog to the vet and increased their exercise and mental enrichment and s/he is still distressed when you leave. So, what do you do now? Well, first of all what DON'T you do. Do not stop being affectionate with your dog, don't stop talking to them, playing with them, snuggling up on the sofa or even letting them sleep on your bed if that is what normally happens. There is no evidence that by doing any of this, your dog will develop separation issues. In stopping doing these things, you are more likely to cause both you and your dog more distress, which is not healthy for either of you.

Another thing not to worry about is whether your dog is following you around the house. Most dogs who have separation anxiety do follow their owners around but a high percentage of dogs who do

NOT have the disorder do the same – following you does not mean that your dog has separation anxiety. However, people have been reporting that their dog is becoming more ‘clingy’ during lockdown. This does not necessarily mean that they are more distressed, it may just mean that they are just more used to you being around.

Again, consider if you wish to seek professional behavioural help. This is the ideal as there may be various factors that are influencing your dog’s behaviour. However, you can also start teaching your dog to be alone.

Steps to help your dog cope with separation

- Teaching your dog to be alone must happen in very, very tiny steps – just a few seconds at a time.
- Go into another room and close the door – fold laundry, make a cup of tea.
- Keep the absence short at first – set up a camera/device so that you can watch your dog using Zoom, Facetime or similar and build up the time they are alone slowly – just a few seconds at a time.
- If your dog is relaxed behind a closed door inside the house then increase the length of time, distance from the closed door etc. so you are working towards actually leaving the house.
- When leaving the house, remember to start being outside for just a few seconds and build up time and distance gradually.
- Keep an eye on the dog and if there are any signs of distress return immediately as this is already too much separation/isolation for the dog. Make a note of how long you were out before they became agitated, and next time start at a far lower duration of separation.
- Most importantly, your dog should not be showing any signs of distress or agitation before you increase the time you are away from them. Then you can gradually chop and change – sometimes make it shorter separation, sometimes longer – but try not to increase time away in a straight line. Remember to not increase the time in big jumps, just in matters of seconds to begin with and then minutes.

If your dog is relaxed for short absences of 10-15 minutes when you are out, try to go out for half an hour and build from there.

If your dog shows even mild signs of distress and is not relaxed, go back to your last successful separation and build up again from there.

Every dog is different and every dog copes differently with being alone. The most important thing to do is to watch your dog and listen to what they are trying to tell you.

Work at their pace and have patience – trying to force them to ‘get over it’ does not work and usually makes matters worse.

Desensitisation to leaving cues (signals) can really help. Think of all the signs that let the dog know that you are about to leave them, e.g. putting on shoes, picking up keys, locking doors, applying lippy(!), etc. Spend some time going through these rituals, one at a time or all together but without actually leaving the house. For example, put your boots on and then sit down and read a book; pick up your keys and make a coffee. Remember that our dogs are watching us all the time and those with anxiety related to being left will pick up on these signs from us which will build up a feeling of anxiety even before we actually leave.

Also remember your dog is going to be more relaxed when alone if they had exercise. This may be a walk or time in the garden playing with you. Also, they need things to do when left: safe enrichment toys and chews, such as puzzle toys or a stuffed Kong.

Get Help

Please remember, if your dog is not doing well when alone, you need professional help. Usually separation issues can be resolved but it is not easy to do it alone. If you are concerned talk to your vet in the first instance, in case there are any underlying medical causes. Qualified behaviour help is available from the Animal Behaviour and Training Council <http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk/> Separation problems lend themselves very well to remote consultations with a behaviourist, some of whom specialise in separation problems.