

ABTC ADVICE: Helping your dog cope with being on their own

If you have been at home full-time, perhaps working from home, your dog will have enjoyed the extra attention and time spent with you. If you are now going to be away from home more your dog will have to get used to spending time home 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 reduce the risks of your dog developing separation-related problems.

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 they will just curl up on their bed. This is really easy to do - all you need is a tablet, laptop, phone or camera and WIFI.

Next steps:

- Download a video conferencing app such as Zoom or Skype to your device that will remain at home.
- Then do the same on your phone so you can then see what happens when you leave the property. Make sure your device[s] are set up in the area your dog typically spends the majority of their time.
- Get as wide a picture as you can, to show you as much of the area of your home as your device will allow (look at settings such as 16:9/wide screen to enable this). Use more than one device if you can – using old handsets and or your laptop/tablet and connecting them to the WIFI is a simple way to do this.
- Ensure you have ‘muted’ yourself and have turned off your camera that is linked to your phone. That way your dog cannot see or hear you from the digital device that is monitoring them, but you can still see and hear them. This helps avoid causes any unnecessary distress should they see or hear you. Note: If you are using several devices around the property, then you will need to mute the audio on all but one to avoid feedback created across the devices at home. Resist the urge to

Speak to your dog when they are home alone. 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 and they start to become anxious - return home.

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 Help section below.**

It is important that you do not tell your dog off if they have chewed anything, been noisy or made a mess. Doing so can 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. If the vet gives your dog the all clear, then you may wish to seek help from a behaviourist at this point, **please see the section below on ‘Get Help’.**

You should also consider whether the behaviour change is due to boredom. 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 they are still distressed when you leave. So, what do you do now?

Continue to be affectionate with your dog. It is OK to talk to them, play with them, snuggle up on the sofa, or even let them sleep on your bed if that is what normally happens. There is no evidence to suggest that by doing any of this, your dog will develop separation issues. By stopping such interactions with your dog, there is a greater chance of causing both you and your dog more distress, which we want to avoid.

If your dog follows you around the property, that is OK. Dogs are highly social animals and like our company; most dogs who have separation anxiety do follow their owners around, yet a high percentage of dogs who do not.

So, if your dog is following you around, this does not mean your dog has a separation anxiety. However, people do report that their dog becomes 'clingy' when they are at home full-time. This does not necessarily mean that your dog is more distressed when left, 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 – perhaps fold some laundry, or 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 lip balm(!), 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 <https://abtc.org.uk/practitioners/> Separation problems lend themselves very well to remote consultations with a behaviourist, some of whom specialise in separation problems.