

What is limpeting and what can you do to prevent it?

16 April 2022

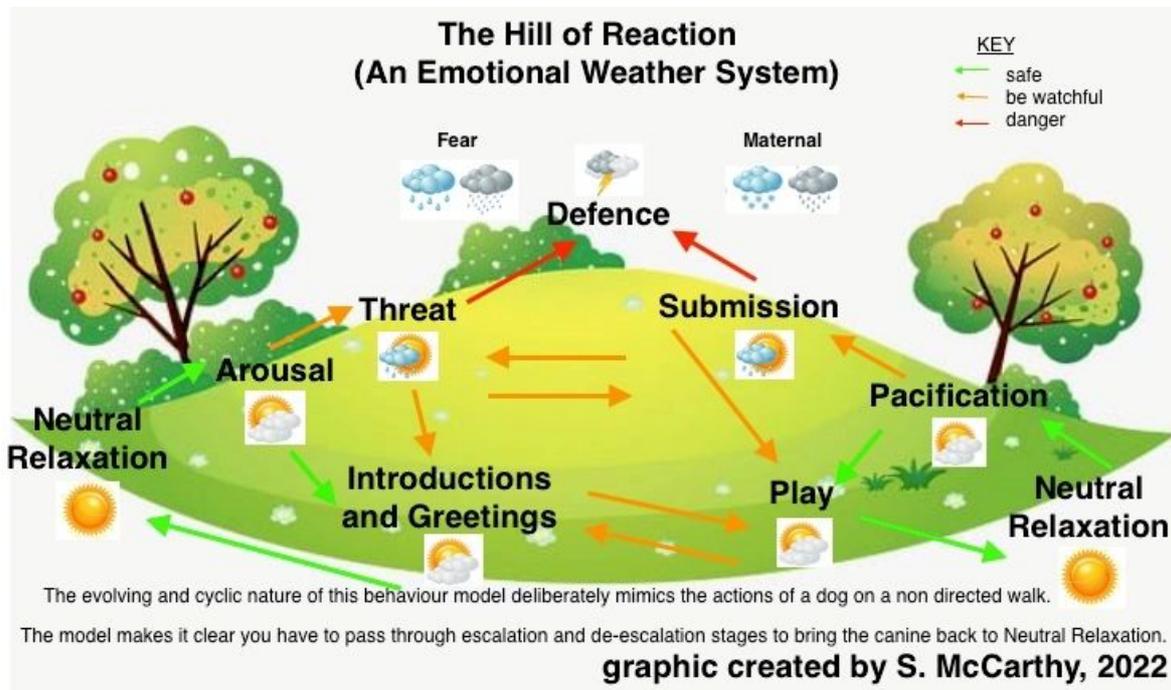
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[This is not love when a dog can't stop doing this with you.](#)

'Limpeting' is our term for pathological hyper-attachment and

it only happens in a **stressed-to-the-point-of-being-constantly-overwhelmed** 'kettle dog' that is too often up at the top of what we call the Hill of Reaction and can't come down.



It is often 'kettle dog' taken to the extreme. And if it develops into separation anxiety, that's on you.

9. Hyper-Attachment

| DEFINITION | ABSENT | VERY MILD | MILD | MODERATE | SEVERE |
|---|---|--|---|---|--|
| Overly attached to primary handler, seeks to return to primary handler when handled by others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readily adapts to new handler or caretaker even when primary handler is visible | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates slight attachment to primary handler and familiar individuals • Signs may include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. looking for handler 2. Readily | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates mild attachment to primary handler and familiar individuals • Signs may include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. looking for handler 2. exhibiting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forms strong attachments to primary handler and familiar individuals • Signs may include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. prolonged seeking of primary handler | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forms very strong attachments to primary handler and familiar individuals • Signs may include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. severe anxiety and prolonged |

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|---|--|
| | <p>adapts to a new handler or caretaker who provides support for short periods</p> | <p>mild anxiety with or without minor vocalizing</p> <p>3. readily adapts to new handler or caretaker with support, which</p> | <p>2. moderate anxiety and difficulty and/or unwillingness to work with and respond to new handler despite providing support.</p> | <p>d inability or unwillingness to work with and respond to new handler despite providing support.</p> <p>2. unable to stay on task.</p> |
|--|--|---|---|--|

| | | | | |
|---------------|------------------|---------------------|---|--|
| | | include use of food | staying on task. • Adapts slowly to new handler or caretaker even when primary handler is not visible. | adaptation to new handler or caretaker if primary handler is not present |
| Absent | Very Mild | Mild | Moderate | Severe |

[See how anxiety can be misunderstood by humans as it can be so similar to happy and excited behaviour.](#)

HOW DOES IT DEVELOP?

A dog who's been taken from their mum too soon or in a traumatic way (looking at you, breeders and dog dumpers who won't neuter their pets!) or had an emotionally unreliable primary human care giver is going to react this way to you. Wanting to cuddle and refusing to be put down (and other clingy actions) when you first get your dog is not a normal behaviour for a dog! (Which is why the TV show at [Wood Green Animal Centre](#) makes us cringe! They let the prospective adopters think if the dog comes over eager for fuss, or rolls on their back right away it means the dog is bonded and they should choose that dog when really they are on super high alert and their behaviour is basically saying 'look, I'm cute, please don't hurt me!' We really do wonder who many of their dogs come back to them due to fear bonding but of course the show doesn't televise that bit!)

It does not mean they love you or have suddenly bonded (well not in a good way anyway)- they don't know you, and they are

actually scared half to death!

So, this behaviour could be due to

TOTAL LACK OF CARE

such as a human that *abandoned them under eight weeks old* or in a *dangerous place* such as the street or a kill shelter, or they mean well but just don't have the tools to provide the right environment for the dog- like *lack of* (not necessarily but can often be breed/mix related) activities or what we call '*dog jobs*' that gives their life purpose and structure. Without this stable foundation as the default in the new home environment from the minute the dog arrives is for the dog to start to *assume all situations are dangerous* and act accordingly.

Or it could be due to

TOO MUCH CARE

where the human treats the pup *like a spoiled human baby* and tries to wrap them up in metaphorical cotton wool (or stupid outfits; or won't let them walk- very common in very small dogs) *see to all their needs immediately no matter how unreasonable* they are from day one when they should be finding their own way in their new world. We call this process **DECOMPRESSION**. It's not set in stone, but **often the smaller the dog, the more likely they are to develop these conditions.**

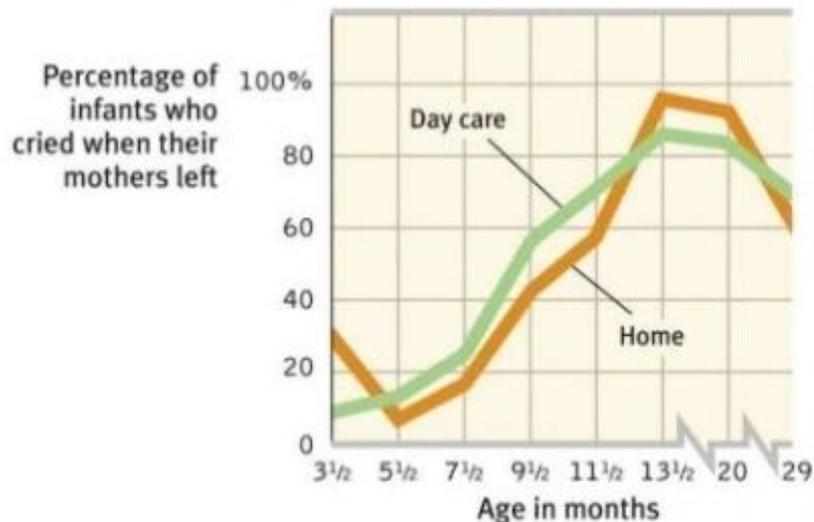
Or it could be the humans going from one to the other, making the dog even more uncertain and is common in animal abusers when done deliberately.

Anyone who deliberately lets a new dog overattach to them too fast, or at all, is utterly irresponsible, but so often it's **done out of misguided love for a dog, or trying to love the dog like a human when they are not human and the boundaries aren't healthy** as a result. We can even overdo it with human children and have similar attachment problems as a result.

Influences on Separation Anxiety

Effects of Environment on Attachment

Separation anxiety peaks and fades whether kids are at home or in day care.



With dogs however, doggy day care often helps a pup of all ages. This is because as a species they are more likely to actively want to cooperate with other dogs at an early age provided their human primary care giver has provided a good foundation.

WHAT CAN I DO TO PREPARE FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF ADOPTING AN ANXIOUS DOG?

PREPARATION. We can't emphasise this enough.

And **LISTEN TO THE RESCUE.** We can't emphasise this enough either.

So often as a rescue we see people saying they'd offer a 'loving home', and waving this fact like some kind of trump card thinking SURELY that will swing the adoption for them- we know they're not a suitable adopter when they get upset and angry if we ask what else they'll offer. Here, human love is both not enough and too much for your new rescue dog. You are deliberately creating a fear bond that will ruin your life and the dog's life- and, unsurprisingly, the dog suffers further as they

end up surrendered for something that was entirely preventable, increasing stress levels and making hyper attachment even more likely with the new adopters, should they ever get any.

KNOWLEDGE is key over love. Any good rescue provides that knowledge- so listen to them! It's **normal for dogs to respond with fear** to some stimuli that are unknown to them and to which they weren't introduced. It's normal to show what humans interpret as 'aggressive' behaviour when confronting an individual that is perceived as a **threat** and from whom there is **no escape**, and to use aggression more quickly in these situations as a defence mechanism. **And if your love for them disappears because they bare their teeth, that's a problem in you and not the dog.**

They are suffering from chronic post-traumatic stress!

And many humans' reaction is to judge them 'dangerous' and throw them away in a shelter or just kick them out.

For some dogs it's their breed, so the extra high fear response and clinginess can be due ***genetic factors humans brought out in them on purpose when breeding them***, or because of experiences that flooded them with excess hormones during development and learning. The knowledge and study of these elements is essential for the correct diagnosis and application of the ideal counters to help reduce the stress levels in your dog- this can be

- training,
- behavioural advice and techniques
- therapy alongside herbal calmatives
- and in some severe/neurological cases, pharmaceutical intervention.

One thing is for sure, **they can't release the stress by**

themselves, as most dogs do while processing during decompression.

WHY ARE THEY DOING IT?

The dog is stuck in the grip of psychological conflict, which produces only anxious responses, and limits their ability to co-exist in a state of calm with its environment, resulting in a social malfunction. (Lunging, reactivity, unpredictability, teeth baring for their first showing of anxiety etc) then up goes the cry ‘but it happened out of nowhere!’”

NO IT DID NOT come out of nowhere. You are not reading your dog properly. They did show you. You just weren’t watching.

And because **you don’t see the signs they have lost trust in you** that you will protect them when they feel threatened and will **stop coming to you for healthy engagements**. Rather, they will, from the minute they come home

- *paw* at you,
- insist on constant *cuddles*,
- *protest* (chew, messing in the house, howl) when you go out (even out of the room!)
- become *phobic* of everyday items (furniture, noises, people, their own belongings)

and if left long enough will become ***depression that often only medication might fix***. So when your rescue tells you how to decompress you dog on arrival- **if you won’t listen to your dog, listen to the rescue and follow their rules!**

WHAT CONDITIONS CAN ANXIETY CAUSE?

The most frequent anxiety-related problem is **separation anxiety**, which can be seen in the following behaviours

1. limpeting (kettle) or hiding (lava) for little obvious reason even when they in other areas have gone into third stage decompression
2. fear aggressiveness,
3. fears and phobias

4. obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Dog separation anxiety is defined as “the **behavioural disorder** which appears when a dog is left on its own at home or when it is separated from its owners (Sherman and Mills, 2008)”. This means you will **realise they have it by how they act**. It’s common, almost inevitable, in canines that haven’t done what’s called a **correct detachment**. In other words a particular period in their development up to and including around the time of puberty where they healthily break the bond to their mother and/or primary human carer. When the new human goes out of sight, **panic** ensues in the dog. Puberty (usually indicated in girls by a dog’s first season or descending of the testicles in boys) **can happen any time after 7 months** old; though Romanian dogs can often have seasons or full testes by 16-20 weeks old. So you have all their *hormones and rebelliousness* to deal with too, which often make them *act out similar to a human toddler*, made all the worse by them going through the usual puppy **fear stages**. **Dogs DO NOT age 7 years for every human year**, it’s a total **myth** that only harms the relationship between humans and dogs.

Separation anxiety may be related to stress signs caused by **(new) situations, which only get worse as time goes on**, such as

- the dogs being *left alone* for long time intervals (adopters are at work for example)
- *restrictions in social interactions* with other dogs- never allowed offlead in a closed field with them/pulling them away from/picking the dog up to avoid new dogs etc
- lack of *exploratory behaviour* (what we call ‘dog jobs’ such as toy engagement (blog) human interacting (blog) and *physical exercise* like carefully introduced and structured walks
- being used to a continuous human company are left alone for the first time for a long time (due to vacation, sick leave or unemployment for example)
- after the dog has suffered a *traumatic event*, such as a time period spent in a shelter or abandoned in a dangerous place (roadside/forest/town (often tied up or put in a box outside a rescue))
- after a *change in the routine or family structure* (new working schedule, moving to a new home, or a new pet or person (adult or child) in the house).

Other less common symptoms are

- anorexia/ vomiting
- biting at paws/inside the back legs/ anywhere they can reach
- acral dermatitis (also called [lick granuloma](#)) due to licking, to which gun dogs and larger breeds are least prone and terrier and smaller breeds are most prone, but you do see it in other dogs too.



Constant chewing causes this. It could also be (stress induced) demodex.

Note this condition also has **physical and psychological origins** however such as

- allergies,
- infection,
- or joint pain

as well as

- fear,
- anxiety,
- boredom or
- obsessive-compulsive disorders (as their fear has been left ignored or worst punished over a long period of time).

But most common of all, when adopters are asked to describe their dogs, the phrases that

are usually used is “very clingy”, or “my shadow” and it’s this behaviour in dogs that is most usually mistaken for the dog really loving you when in fact they are living in state of perpetual terror.

Add boredom and frustration from lack of brain stimulation to the anxiety and is it any wonder you come home to shredded curtains, or they’ve messed in the house despite being toilet trained, or are **howling in desperation not love of you** when you come back through the door.

MY DOG SEEMS TO HAVE THIS. WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP THEM CALM DOWN AND ENJOY LIFE INSTEAD?

NEVER make a big deal of leaving the home. Don’t fuss them up and over talk to them (dogs respond best to simple three or four word sentences that include their name), keep your coat and keys out of their sight if not their hearing as that’d be almost impossible, and leave quietly. This is because symptoms of this disorder frequently appear when the animal realises that they are about to be left alone, being more obvious when the owner goes out, and becoming more intense between 30 and 60 minutes after leaving.

The anxiety behaviours can be any and all of the following:

- excessive vocalisation (increase in whining, howling and barking),
- destructive behaviour (especially directed at objects frequently manipulated by the owners’ and that carry their smell- this is why you find the laptop cord chewed or the remote control or your favourite slippers destroyed!),
- restlessness (pacing, circling, exaggerated/desperate exploratory behaviour like ragging beds, shredding toys not in play, over exuberant play with other dogs and humans)
- inappropriate defecation and urination
- hyper-salivation (drooling)
- and being escape artists!

This is why **most rescues want high fencing if you have a garden** so potential adopters really need to start understanding about this- most dogs are on *hyper alert* when they come home

and if you've pushed too much love on them too fast they can't process it all and actually are **trying to escape YOU** to get *a chance to process all these new and overwhelming things!* So instead of complaining the rescue won't fit round you, choose the right dog you feel you would fit, and ask the rescue for advice on which dogs would be happiest in your home in their experience and opinion. We adopt to people without gardens provided the balcony doesn't turn into the loo and they are experienced enough to get a new dog to manage stairs or lifts, or not get fed up with accidents inside while they toilet train because they can't just open a door for the dog to pee or poo. But when rescues encounter people who just dismiss their rules, it's likely communication will cease. All rescues have rules to protect the dog, not to be biased against a particular adoption application. So the possibility of canine anxiety in the wrong home is also why.

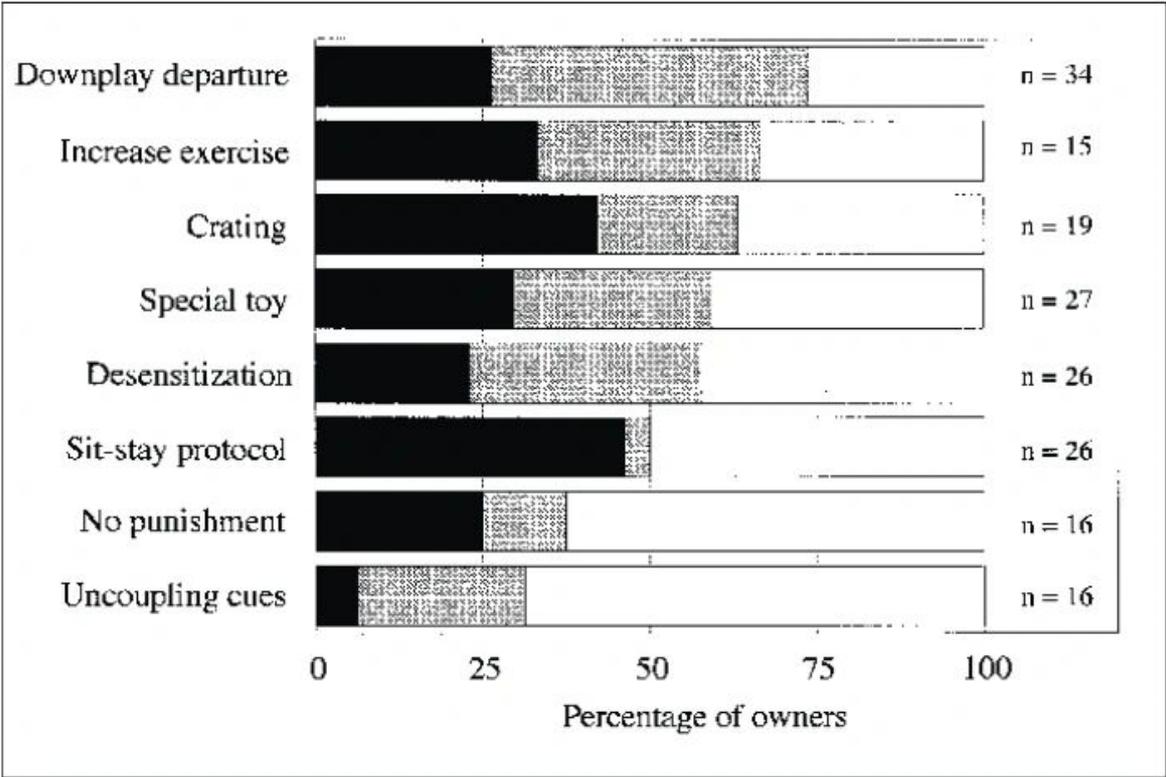
However, **changing your leaving routine is only part** of the story. You also need to **change their mental associations** which turn into annoying (for you!) physical actions and develop new muscle memories with them if you want to break this anxiety long term. In a [study of 52 dogs and methods their adopters used to calm anxiety](#), run by veterinary expert [Katherine Houpt](#), many other methods were needed as well as downplaying leaving the house, such as 'pretending to leave' (letting them see you leave and only popping round the corner for 5 minutes, then 10, then 15, which is called '**desensitisation**' and we'll talk more about this later in the blog) diverting with toys and tasks, and more.

If you don't slowly get them used to being alone then of course they're going to panic if you suddenly leave them for hours!

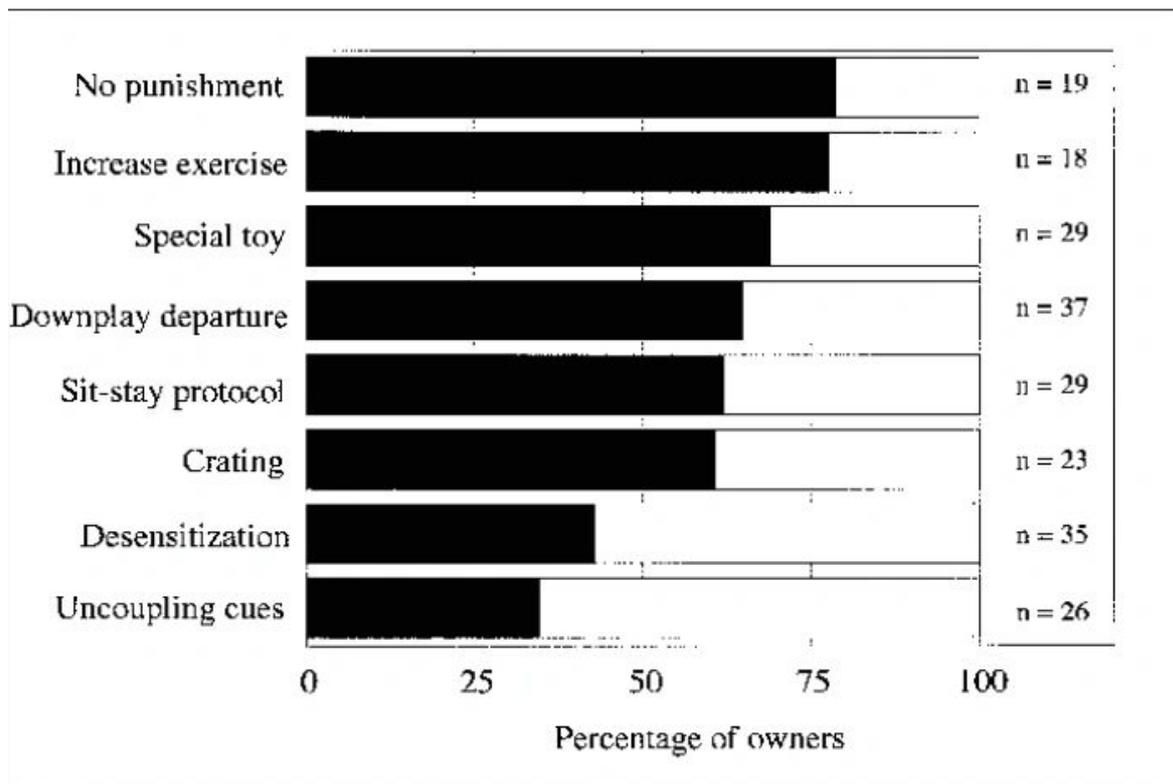
You could try **displacement activity**:

- simple commands like sit- as [sitting releases calming hormones in dogs](#)
- focusing them on a favourite toy or activity toy like a healthy treat filled Kong
- and/or tire them out with all the sensory input and exercise they'd get on a longer than usual walk.

Don't try a new place though for this extra activity, that could well be too much stimulation-use a tried and tested route but go round twice or stay out longer, letting them have loose lead and more sniffing than usual, or do some heel work if they are human focused on walks. None of these will work alone, or immediately, and you will have to constantly reinforce these new 'rules' unless you want them to revert to old damaging behaviour.



Bar graph indicating percentage of owners of 52 dogs with separation anxiety that believed a specific discharge instruction was very effective (solid bar), slightly effective (shaded bar), or not effective (open bar) at modifying their dogs' behaviors.



Bar graph indicating percentage of owners of 52 dogs with separation anxiety that complied with specific discharge instructions for < 1 month (open bar) or ≥ 1 month (solid bar).

Were you surprised how successful (or not) some methods are? The black bar shows just how often humans give up on the training and reinforcement even before a month is up...

Note these studies involved crating. **We are a no crate rescue** because of the background of our dogs- they are simply not used to regularly being in one, but even in dogs used to them, like in this study, crating is only 50% effective. This is a 1 in 2 chance it will not only not work but make things worse as there's a legal minimum size/area a dog must spend a lot of time in. Crates do not meet this criteria, so they can get institutionalised like human prisoners. Much better to find a method that avoids crating even/especially if it means more effort on your part.

HANDY BEHAVIOUR CHECKLIST DURING DECOMPRESSION AND BEYOND- IS YOUR DOG A 'LIMPET'?

Does your dog have

- A tendency to follow the owner throughout the whole house seeking to maintain a constant physical contact-‘hugging’ you, sitting on you, crying if not allowed to follow you and more. Hugging is not a natural dog response and is not always a healthy action.
- a habit of jumping up and (hyper) focusing on you at the slightest movement from you even long after decompression ends
- an increase of physical distance with the owner triggers some/ more/ 'worse' anxious behaviour (such as destruction of human belongings)
- 'crazy happy' (hint- this is not always excitement) greetings when the adopters return home the dog shows excessive enthusiasm.(Pre pubescent pups are usually excluded from this provided they had their mums for long enough, as are dogs who are chewing things they shouldn't in front of you/ before you have trained them not to)



- Howling/ taking too long to stop barking at something new or calm down after new experiences
- Inappropriate elimination behaviour (urine, sometimes faeces) linked with territorial marking in males or wetting that has no physical cause your vet can detect.

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO IF MY DOG'S DOING THIS? WHERE DID I GO WRONG?

Try not to blame yourself. It's highly likely the dog developed this long before you adopted them and see above for reasons why and how- but it's also due to humans being ignorant or awful. But be honest with yourself, if they have got worse then yes you did become part of the problem and retraining yourself is what will help the dog best. Getting **upset will make the dog pick up on your anxiety** about it, which won't improve matters at all.

Herbal helps for anxiety- we advise the use of these as a preventative from the minute your new dog arrives.

[catnip](#)

[valerian teas and compounds](#)

CBD and/or hemp derivated oils (which we hope to stock soon) All these can be administered in a **low impact way** rather than trying to force pills down a scared dog's throat as you can put these in toys and on beds, add cooked in food toppers or as it is to wet or raw food in appropriate dosages. None of these can be picked out or spat out like pills and there are usually much less/no side effects with correct usage. Ask your rescue's nutrition specialist on your support chat for more info on this! You want to recognise, gently deal with and retrain such behaviours before going down the **pharmaceutical route** but sometimes it is necessary to control anxiety with [anxiolytic \(anti anxiety\) drugs](#) sometimes the same ones prescribed to humans like gabapentin or fluoxetine more commonly known as prozac, **but only alongside behaviour modification therapy.**

Sadly the meds are to make the dog's fear easier for the human to deal with, not necessarily easing tension long term in the dog,

and numerous studies have shown the quicker the dogs 'snaps out' of their 'worst' habits the more likely people are not to surrender the dog to a rescue. But meds on their own are only a short term fix and people often think when the 'worst' behaviour subsides that the dog is ok and stop the training/ rehabbing. Yet again **the problem is in the human and not**

the dog in these cases.

They **must have new experiences and appropriate actions training to replace the behaviours** you want them to lose!

So do not stop the work with your dog if they improve a bit- there's still a long way to go.

WHAT BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION TECHNIQUE CAN BE USED?

Desensitisation and Counterconditioning

Desensitisation (NOT **flooding**, where the dog is exposed directly to a maximum intensity anxiety-producing situation or stimulus) and **counterconditioning** is best.

This is giving them **new training/ removing the stressor** and **re-associating with positive events** to give them a chance to develop more **positive muscle memories** than the stressed based ones they currently have, which helps them calm down and process. Similar therapies are used in **humans with PTSD, phobias and OCD behaviours**.



Dogs tell you how they are feeling with every part of their bodies from their ears to the tips of their tails...

Be careful not to desensitise too much- like humans, they too can experience so much they go **neutral and withdrawn**, and stop 'caring' about what is happening around them, which can

be mistaken for 'good behaviour'.

Desensitisation and counterconditioning can

- **diminish the anxiety** that is associated with the owner's departure,
- **reduce the limpeting** (hyper-attachment)
- **reimagine and reset the 'hyper bond'** between the adopter and the dog
- and **teach the dog how to live** and remain home alone, **without anxiety**.

Reinforcing every day, more than once a day, new behaviours to do instead of panicking tries to show the dog that feels anxious that it may remain tranquil while the adopters are out then return home. It diverts their impulse to 'act out' (they can't help this- it's trauma learned muscle memories you need to change into new positive ones). Slowly getting a dog used to the maximum time you need the dog to be left alone gives them the knowledge that you will always return once you have left.

This relearning will take time!

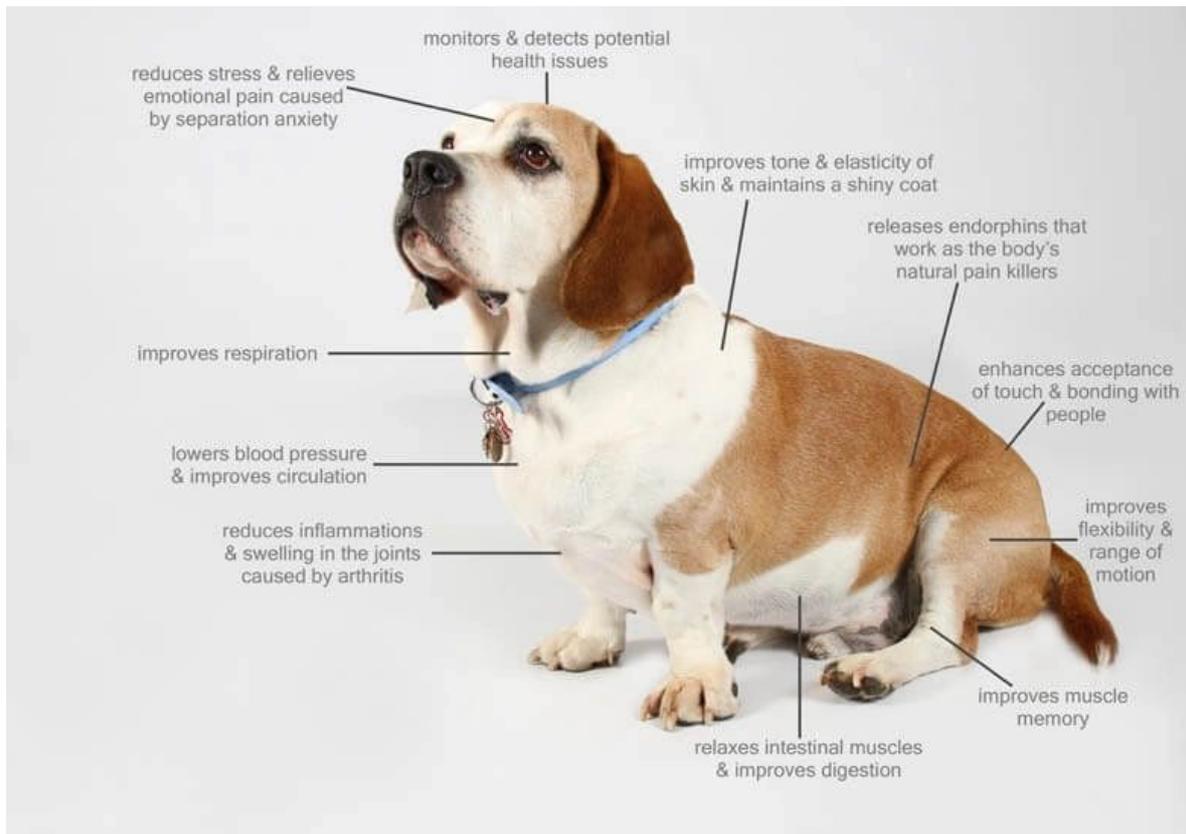
The anxiety that is produced **during retraining and removing their old/damaged psychological support system** during this time **interferes with the learning**.

This is why they **need a calmative in these crucial stages**- we recommend herbal interventions/ preventions first, and only in extreme cases pharmacological treatment. It is very important that during this first period of treatment, the dog should not be left alone at home; the owner will have to provisionally resolve this problem by finding a place other than the home for the dog (doggy day care, correctly introduced people the dog trusts to come round and engage with them/ walk them) and offer the necessary diversions so that the dog does not miss human company.

Firstly, the adopter must have control over the dog. This is the counterconditioning part. Right now **you're not noticing their distress so they don't trust you so you have to get that back**. To increase your control **go back to basics- obedience** exercises such as the commands of sit and stay. You could also try

- **relaxation techniques** such as massage routines (we hope to write a blog soon on

this) and/or [grooming](#) which is a gentle healthy bonding exercise.



[Some useful massage areas for your pup!](#)

- **counterconditioning** for positive experiences using **simple praise sentences every time and treats every other time** the dog controls its anxiety,
- and/or meditation 'frequency'/nature **sounds videos** easily found on Youtube to provide *continuous, natural and non threatening noise* as the background default sound in your home (more on the science of sounds in canine behaviour will be tackled in another blog). We use [Johnnie Lawson's Youtube channel](#) a lot here with doggy arrivals old and new, and it really works! All sorts of great nature sounds (no music) with matching video done at all times of the day and night- and they last for hours so can play for the entire time you are out.

Once this first step is achieved, and this could take weeks or even months, **a little every day**, a technique based on learning by desensitisation is begun, to get the animal to accept or tolerate the owner's departure from home. *Sometimes a dog prefers both steps happening at the same time to know what they can do instead of panic-* so this is when you 'pretend' to leave but come back sooner than they're expecting, progressively longer and longer departures. This method has

successfully used for decades in humans and pet mammals. Try this for a 'Pretend to leave' routine but keep your plans flexible! Not all methods suit all dogs.

- Do your usual 'get your coat on and pick up your keys' routine you'd do when leaving the house. However, instead of sitting down, the owner should head towards the exit door, open it without leaving, then closing it and sitting down. This must be **repeated** various times through out the day, until checking that the animal responds with complete tranquillity.
- The following step consists on repeating the previous two, but this time remaining outside for a moment without moving or entering, then sitting calmly on the sofa. **Repeat** until it is assured that the dog tolerates the situation.
- Next, leave and close the door for a few seconds, then open it, enter the house and sit again on the sofa, trying to accustom the dog in tolerating short term absences, starting with a few seconds. The routine will be **repeated** and the dog will be given a signal like "later", (simple hand signals can also be good) leaving and coming back in a minute. The return must be made as something normal, ignoring the dog.
- **Proceed gradually from one step to the other, and between counterconditioning and desensitisation**, and before taking on the following, repeat until the dog shows no sign of anxiety. All the possible ways of leaving home that last less than 10 minutes must be practiced. Many departures can be made per session if the dog manages to relax enough in between them. Once the dog can accept short-term outings (30 to 60 minutes), they will normally be able to tolerate longer intervals of time, between 3 and 8 hours. However, at the beginning the steps should be taken slowly.

These routines are as much for peace of mind for the humans as for the dog. Humans want to problem solve, and dogs just don't think like that, so to avoid the inevitable stress a human will feel when a dog acts like this, using methods you can grow into together can only improve the relationship between you and your dog(s).

Adapted from:

[p 262-6 'Anxiety Disorders in Dogs' August 2011](#) Miguel Ibáñez Talegón and Bernadette Anzola Delgado; Centre of Behavioural Medicine, Animal Production Department, Veterinary Faculty, Universidad Complutense, Madrid Spain.

The full book with all contributors can be found [here](#) .

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Created by:

Lora's Luck Ltd

20-22 Wenlock Road, London, N17GU

Company Number 12130277

EORI GB372394676000

VAT Number 372 3946 76

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website: <https://lorasluck.org>

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