

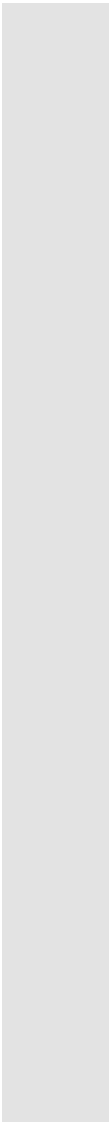
Understanding Separation Anxiety In Dogs

Daniel Shaw CDBC





In today's webinar

- What is separation anxiety?
 - Why might it occur?
 - Myths about separation anxiety
 - How to identify separation anxiety
 - What to do if you think your dog is experiencing separation anxiety
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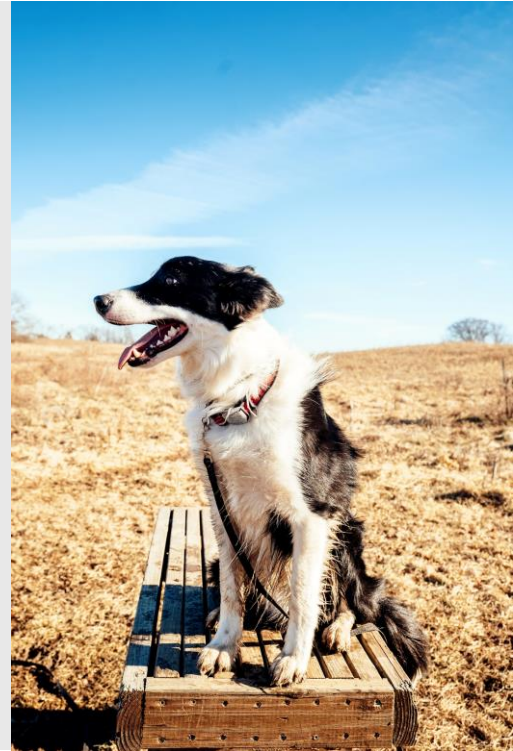
What is separation anxiety?

“When an animal experiences distress in the absence of an owner or caregivers, or in the presence of cues that predict being left alone”

The term “separation related distress” is now commonly used as it assumes less about an animal’s motivation

Other separation related problems

- Frustration of goals – the dog cannot reach the owner
- Boredom – tolerance for alone time varies
- Confusion – more prevalent in older dogs
- Inter-dog problems that present in owner absences
- Overexcitement on owner return
- Excessive destructive behaviour
- Fear whilst alone – not due to separation



What separation anxiety look like?



What triggers
this response?

Departure Cues

- Shoes being put on
- Keys jangling
- Coats being put on
- Different perfume/aftershave
- Different clothes – e.g., smarter dress
- Packing bags
- Putting the dog in a specific room/area
- Not picking up the lead
- Whatever tells your dog you are going out!

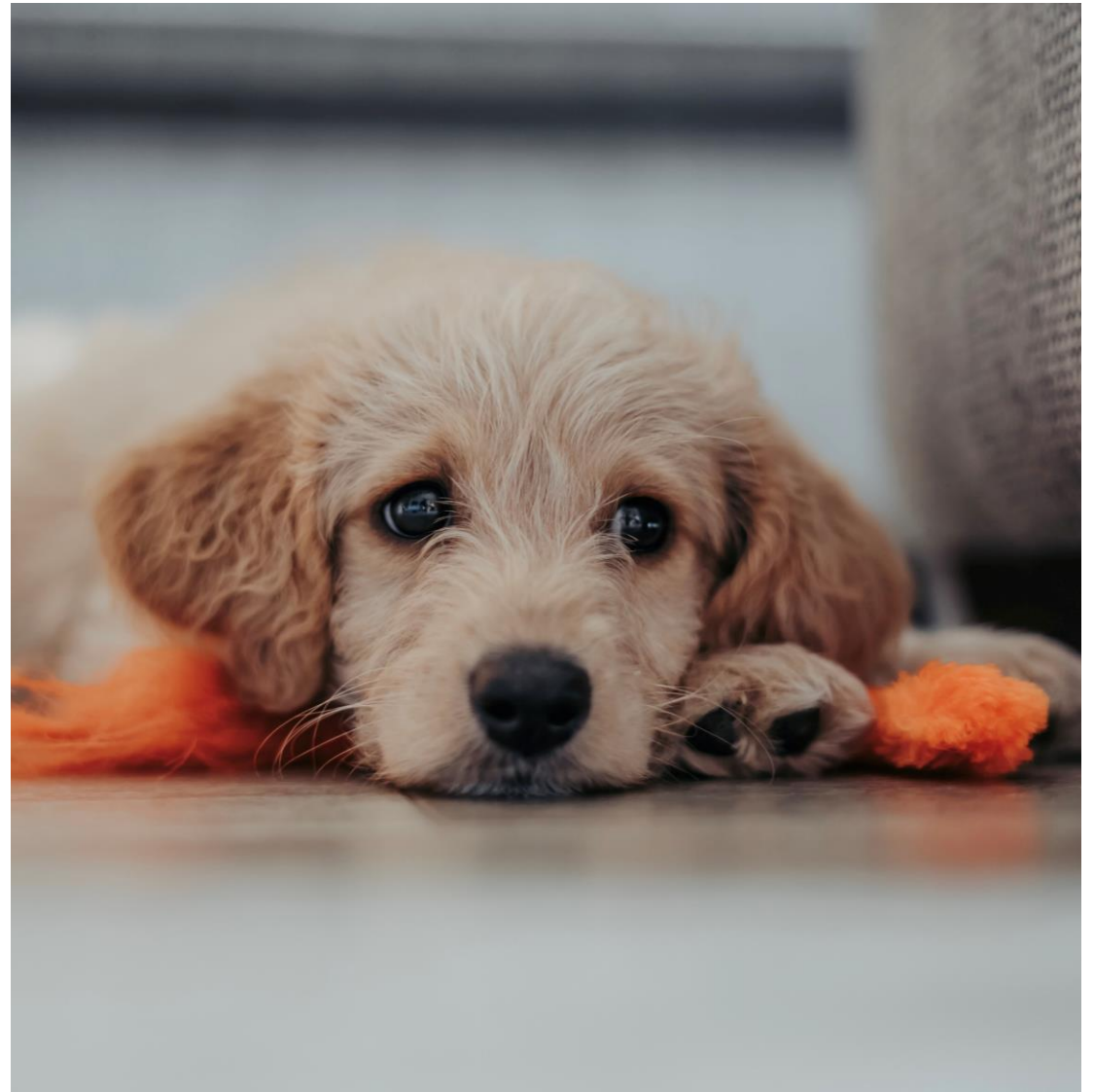


The Absence Itself

How common is separation distress?

Evidence suggests around **50%** of dogs experience separation related problems at some point throughout their life.

Bradshaw et al, 2002; Soares et al., 2010.



Frequent Signs of Related Problems

- Vocalisation – 78% of cases
- Depression – 53% of cases
- Destruction – 45% of cases
- Urination – 28% of cases
- Defecation – 20% of cases

de Assis et al., 2020



Risk Factors for Separation Distress

- Purchased from pet shops are at higher risk
- A history of anxiety
- Male dogs at higher risk
- Aging – dogs mostly stay the same as they age
- Friendships have a protective effect
- Neutering status – complicated
- Playful high arousal greeting/departures are NOT associated with the development of SRD
- Reduction in time left alone
- Sleeping outdoors

McGreevy et al. (2008); Harvey et al. (2022); Rossi et al. (2021); Teixeira & Hall (2021)

Dogs have not evolved to be left alone

- Dogs are a social species.
- Around 50% of free ranging dogs spend their whole life with their family group.
- Those that do disperse from their family tended to do so at around 13 months of age.
- Allo-parental care is common.
- Juveniles (up to 1 year) tend to stay close to adults while out foraging.
- Foraging usually takes place in groups.
- Dogs are regularly seen sleeping in close proximity to each other.

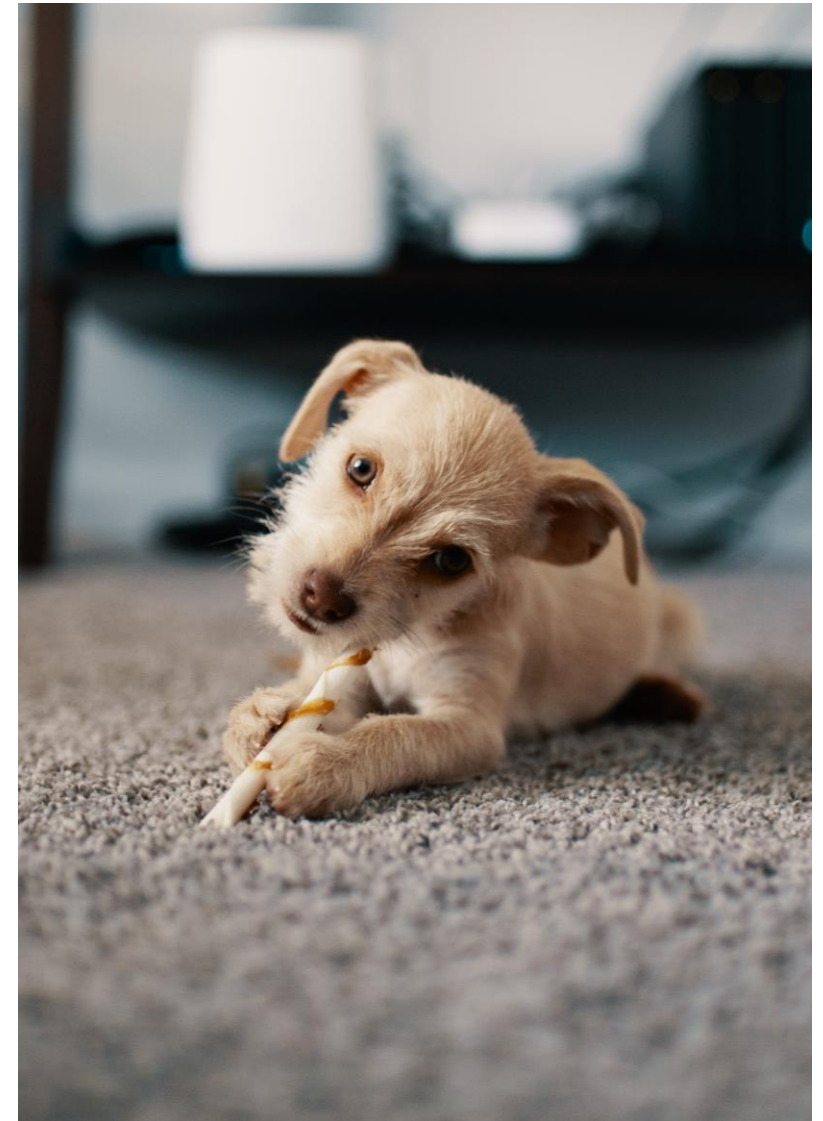
Boitani and Ciucci (1995); Majumder et al. (2014)



Development and Separation Anxiety

- Dogs develop strong attachment bonds to humans.
- Stronger attachments have been directly linked to increased confidence in dogs.
- Stronger attachments are linked to better self regulation abilities in humans and has a protective effect against mental ill health, and this is likely similar in dogs.
- Dogs with secure attachments to their owners are likely to be less stressed during owner absences.

Drake et al. (2014); Parthasarathy and Crowell-Davis (2006); Payne et al. (2015)



Attachment Styles and Separation Anxiety

- **Secure Dog, Insecure Anxious Owner**
 - High levels of owner assumed stress
 - Medium levels of vocalisation and destructive behaviour
 - Low levels of elimination
 - Enthusiastic greeting
- **Insecure Avoidant Dog, Insecure Avoidant Owner**
 - Medium levels of owner concern
 - Silent, non-destructive
 - High levels of elimination
 - Low levels of greeting vigour

Konok, V., Marx, A., & Faragó, T. (2019). Attachment styles in dogs and their relationship with separation-related disorder—A questionnaire based clustering. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 213, 81-90.

Attachment Styles and Separation Anxiety

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 - Medium occurrence of elimination
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Common Myths about Separation Anxiety



Myth 1

There is no evidence older dogs are any more likely to develop separation anxiety. (de Assis et al, 2020; Flannigan & Dodman, 2001).



“If you adopt an older dog they are more likely to develop separation anxiety”

Myth 2

Research shows “spoiling” activities have no association with separation anxiety.
(Flannigan & Dodman, 2001).



“Dogs develop separation anxiety because they are spoiled”



Spoiling activities will only strengthen your dog’s trust in you as a predictor of good things. So will better prepare them to cope with your absences.

Myth 3

“Getting another dog will help with the separation anxiety”



Presence of other pets in the home is not associated with reduced incidents of separation anxiety.
(Flannigan & Dodman, 2001).



Adopting another dog for the wrong reasons may provide more stress for the family as there will now be an extra dog to take care of.

Myth 4

Dogs are not good at thinking about the future, and they have not good the intellectual capacity to punish humans or even realise destructive behaviours would be upsetting to us.



“The dog is punishing you for going out”



Similarly, because dogs cannot engage in mental time travel. Punishing the behaviour is not going to help.

Myth 5

“Getting a crate will solve the problem”



Confinement increases feelings of anxiety in many dogs. So removing as much confinement as possible is key to helping the dog.



Although it may physically prevent the dog from displaying some of the separation related behaviour, it does not mean the anxiety has gone away.

Myth 6

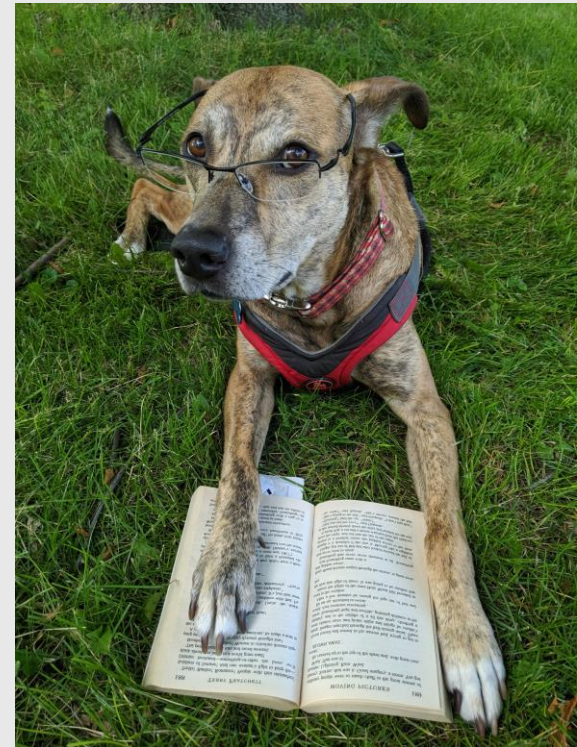
“Dogs with separation anxiety cannot be helped”

There are lots of successful treatments to help dogs with separation anxiety!



How to identify separation anxiety

- Medical Rule Out – thyroid disease, incontinence, urinary tract infection, dental pain, arthritis, endocrine diseases cognitive dysfunction, pregnancy, (and much more).
- Behavioural Rule Out – playing, boredom, teething pain, attempting to thermoregulate, noise/storm phobia, incomplete housetraining, insufficient toilet access, and marking behaviour.
- Observe the behaviour – while left alone, and just before being left alone (video recording is the absolute best tool for this).



What to look out for:

Just before you leave:

- Whining
- Barking
- Drooling
- Panting
- Fast breathing
- Picky eating
- Close proximity to leaver

After you leave:

- Whining
- Barking
- Drooling
- Depression
- Panting
- Fast breathing
- Picky eating
- Distressed vocalisations
- Trembling/shaking
- Attempts at escape
- Destruction
- Urination/defecation
- Self mutilation

The behavioural presentation of the anxiety is merely a symptom of the dog's emotional state. Therefore any indication a dog is feeling anxious should be taken seriously. There is no exhaustive list of symptoms.

Preventing Separation Anxiety

- Build a strong attachment bond with your dog
- Encourage and reinforce calm behaviour around the home
- Do not punish the dog upon returning home
- Provide the dog with things to do while you are away
- Build up absences slowly – start small, work up the duration gradually
- Meet your dog's behavioural needs

Blackwell et al. (2016); Herron et al. (2014)



Canine Hierarchy of Needs

Cognitive Needs

Frustration free puzzles, scent games, novelty, choice



Reinforcement Based Training Needs

Counter-conditioning, desensitisation, relaxation



Social Needs

Bonding to people and other dogs, play with friends, positive interactions



Emotional Needs

Love, trust, consistent environment, predictability, affection



Biological Needs

Safety, eating, drinking, grooming, sleep



1

- Speak to your vet to get make account for any medical conditions that might be causing the problem.

2

- Get a referral to a behaviourist.

3

- Work together to formulate a behavioural modification plan to help your dog to feel more confident around separations.

What to do if your dog already has separation anxiety?

What are the treatments?

- Behaviour modification (e.g. Butler et al., 2011)
 - Counterconditioning and systematic desensitisation
 - Building a secure attachment
 - Strong evidence base
- Psychopharmacological interventions (e.g. Meneses et al., 2021)
 - Situational medication to prevent worsening
 - Long term medication as support treatment
 - Strong evidence base
- Supplements and nutraceuticals
 - Evidence base mixed
 - Strong link between gut and behaviour being explored, may provide avenues for future treatments (Yeh et al., 2022)

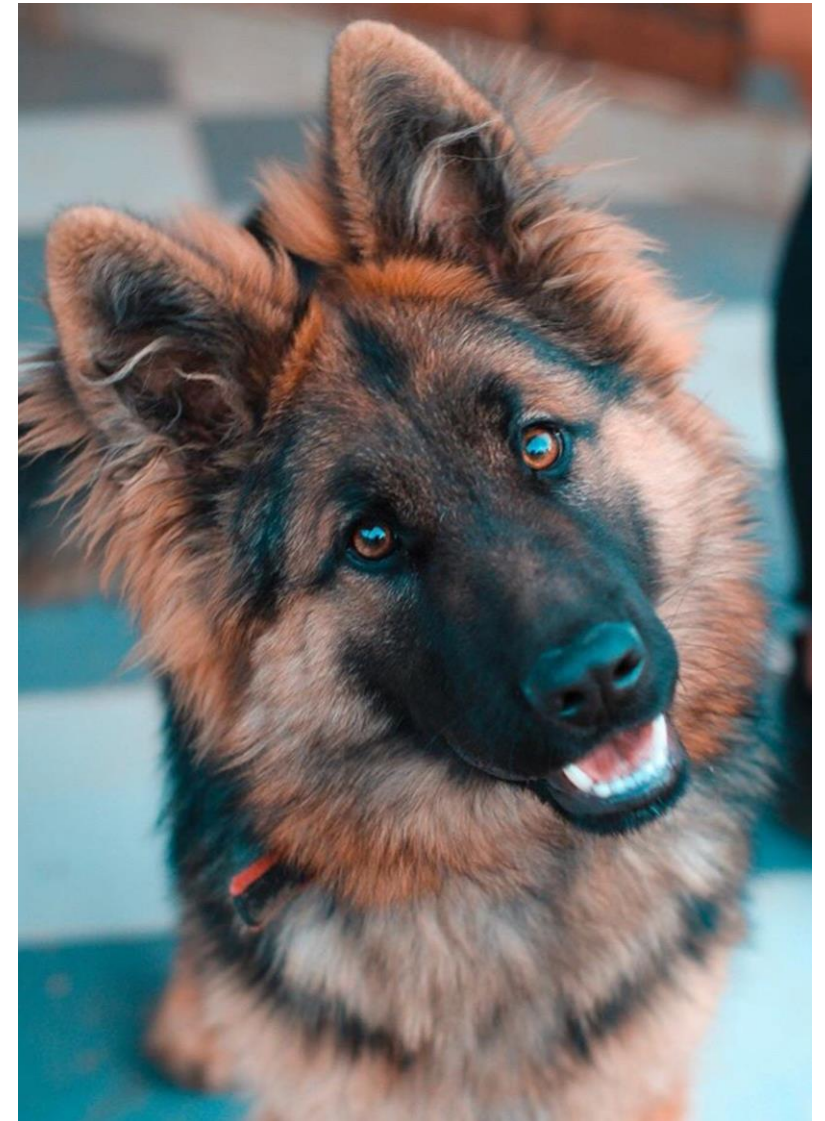
Treatment needs to target the cause of the behaviour, not just take a symptom based approach

Resources

Julie Naismith – Sub Threshold Training (book and podcast available) <https://www.subthresholdtraining.com/about/>

Interview with Malena DeMartini-Price about separation anxiety
<https://www.companionanimalpsychology.com/2020/12/interview-with-malena-demartini-about.html>

You can find a behaviour consultant to support you via the ABTC (<https://abtc.org.uk/>) or the IAABC consultant locator (<https://m.iaabc.org/consultant/>)



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A brown dog with floppy ears is sitting on a grey couch. The dog is looking directly at the camera. A large white rectangular overlay is positioned in the center of the image, containing text. To the left of the overlay is a solid blue vertical bar. The background includes a wooden floor and some green plants.

Any Questions?

Thank you for listening!

If you enjoyed the presentation, we would love your feedback.

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