



How to manage separation issues in dogs

**Information about
separation-related
problems**



**DÔMES
PHARMA**

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Introduction

Dogs are pack animals, so it's no wonder that some of them suffer from fear and anxiety when separated from the people they think of as their pack. A recent study reported that 1.4 million dogs showed signs of distress when left alone¹, and 60% of veterinary professionals reported seeing an increase in dog behavioural issues in the last two years.¹

The good news is that there are ways to alleviate this distress with help from your vet. Let's learn more about what separation-related problems are, how to recognise the common signs, and some helpful management options.

**Sign of distress:
trembling/shaking**



¹ <https://www.pdsa.org.uk/media/13976/pdsa-paw-report-2023.pdf> accessed 04/09/24.

*Sign of distress:
owner seeking behaviour*



What are separation-related problems?

You may be familiar with the term separation anxiety when a dog feels anxious when left alone. These days, vets prefer to use the term separation-related problems as not all dogs that struggle are anxious, some may be scared, panicked, frustrated or even bored. You may have noticed your dog pacing restlessly, or showing signs of distress when you're preparing to leave the house, or in more severe cases you may return home to find signs of destruction. Sadly these are signs that your dog is suffering whilst you are away. Your dog isn't trying to behave badly or punish you for going out. This is a situation that makes some dogs scared or anxious, and their behaviour is a sign of their distress. To put it simply, it scares them to be separated from you!

Common signs of separation-related problems

Separation-related problems often manifest rather dramatically. Your neighbours may complain about barking when you're away from home, or you may get home to find signs of destruction. However, sometimes the signs can be much more subtle and can often be missed. What is your dog trying to tell you?



Sign of distress: "whale eyes"

Common signs of separation problems include:



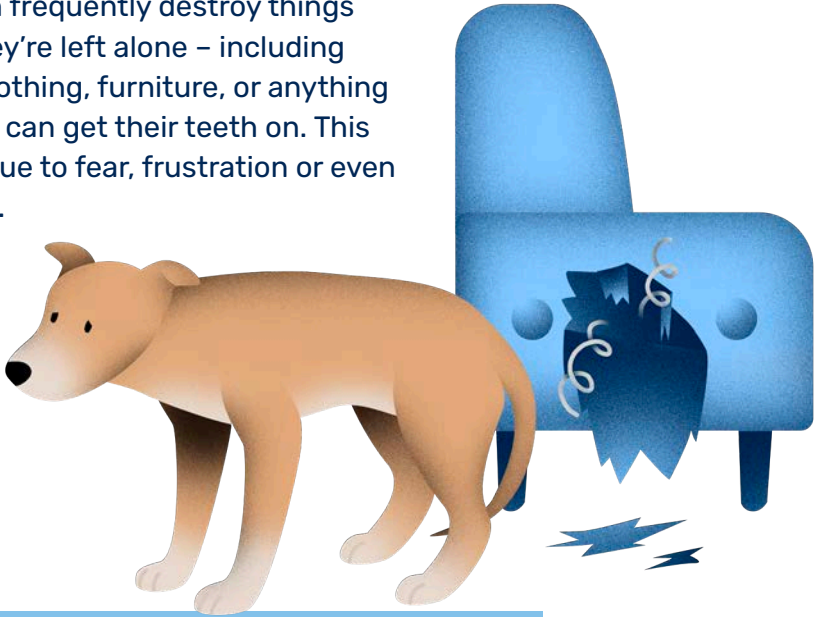
Sign of distress: vocalisation

VOCALISATION

This is the one that bothers the neighbours! A dog may bark or even howl – sometimes for a long time.

DESTRUCTION

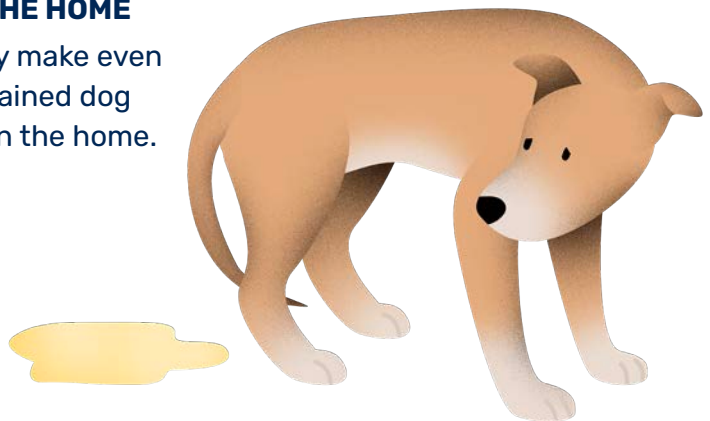
Dogs can frequently destroy things when they're left alone – including shoes, clothing, furniture, or anything else they can get their teeth on. This may be due to fear, frustration or even boredom.



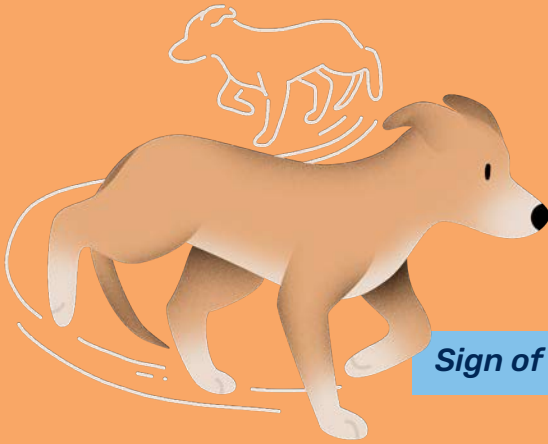
Sign of distress: destructive behaviour

ELIMINATION IN THE HOME

Extreme panic may make even the most house-trained dog have an accident in the home.



Sign of distress: elimination in the home

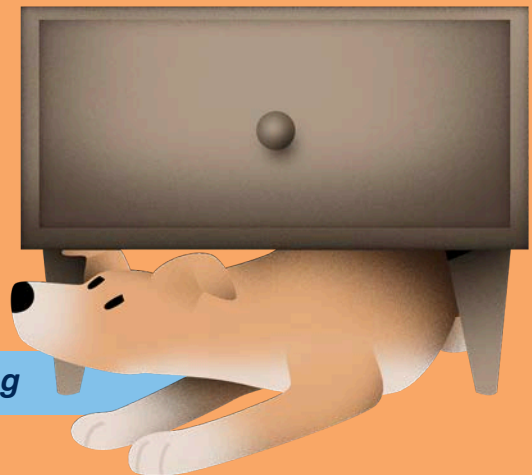


Sign of distress: restless pacing

Some dogs will even try to dig or chew their way out, damaging doors or windows and may injure themselves in the process.

Your dog can show signs of distress in many different ways. For instance, some dogs can be very active and seem to be unable to calm down. They may pace restlessly, bark or howl or pant all the time, even when it is not hot.

However, some dogs express their worries by appearing more withdrawn and hiding. These behaviours might appear less disturbing, but are equally distressing for the dog.



Sign of distress: hiding

Causes and triggers

Sign of distress: panting



The trigger that causes separation problems is a simple one – it upsets your dog when you leave the house without them! If you're wondering why some dogs react this way, just remember that all dogs have evolved as pack animals. Some dogs have learned to handle separation from their owners better than others, but it's perfectly natural that being left alone may make your dog feel anxious. Causes for separation-related problems can include:

- **When a dog moves to a new home a number of times. Dogs with a rescue background are often at risk of developing separation-related problems.**
- **A disruption or a change in the household, such as losing a family member or moving house.**
- **Major schedule changes, such as a transition from remote work to office work. For some dogs even the beginning of a work week after the weekend may be enough of a change to make them feel anxious.**

There is also some possibility of a genetic factor in separation problems. Dogs who have never learned to be alone at a young age may be at risk of developing separation anxiety. So it is worth teaching a young dog that it is OK to be alone for a while.

Management options

Separation-related problems in dogs are treatable – It is important to manage the situation as soon as possible, to stop the problems from getting worse, and it can also be an extremely stressful experience for your dog. There are a few simple things you can do to help your dog deal with separation issues.

These will often prove most effective in combination with each other. You should also talk to your vet, who can help you with a treatment plan.

The goal of management is to reduce your dog's sense of fear and anxiety when you leave the house, making the situation easier to manage for both you and your dog.



***Sign of distress:
hyper-vigilant, looking in
many directions***

BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION

If you typically respond to whining or barking by showing your dog affection, you may accidentally be making the problem worse by rewarding anxious behaviour. The same is true if you act too excited to see your dog when you arrive home – that can reinforce the sense that it's a big deal when you go out. On the other hand, if you punish your dog for making a mess while you're out, you could contribute to their distress – which will also make the problem worse. The most important thing is to remain calm in any situation, and show your dog that everything is alright.

TIPS FOR BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION

The goal of behaviour modification is to help the dog remain calm, even in a stressful situation. Therefore, the dog should be rewarded for every calm behaviour, whether spontaneous or on command.

For this reason:

- Ask the dog to sit before every interaction.
- Praise your dog when it is spontaneously relaxed.
- Ignore undesirable behaviours. Do not punish them.

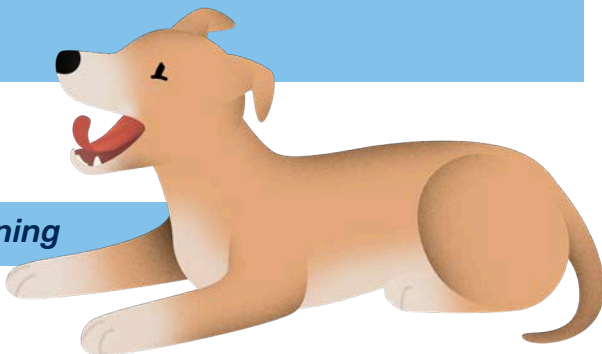
Before leaving:

- Ignore undesirable behaviours.
- As you are leaving, encourage the dog to sit or lie where they feel safe e.g. their bed or crate, reward your pet for this and then calmly leave.

When returning

- Ignore your dog's excessive greeting. Greet the dog briefly, but other than that interact with your dog only when it is quiet or has calmed down, then reward calm behaviour.
- Do not reprimand your dog for destructive behaviour or for urinating or defecating in the house.

Sign of distress: yawning



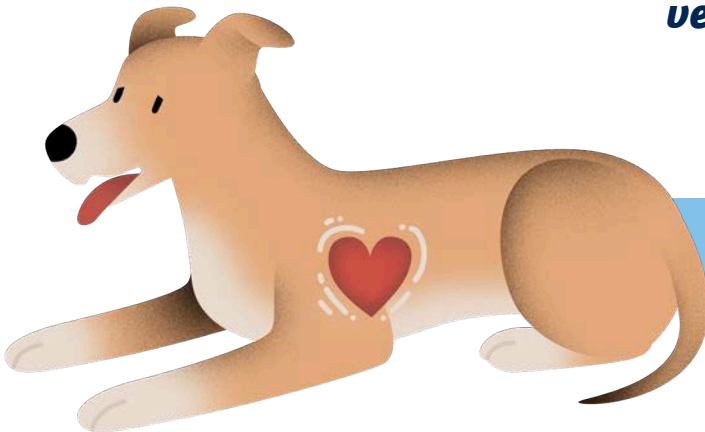
Behaviour modification is most successful when implemented with the help of a trained, reputable behaviourist. They can help to identify the cause of the problem in your dog and work together to find a solution. Consult with your vet or a registered behaviourist for more information.

MEDICATIONS

Separation-related problems can be treated with prescription medications. It is important to consult your vet as soon as possible, as delaying effective treatment may cause the problem to become worse. Your vet will be able to choose the most suitable option for your dog.

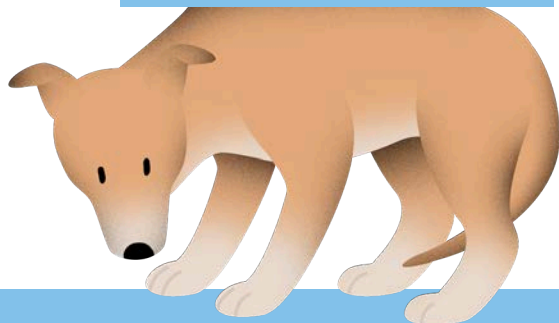
The aim of medication is to relieve the dog's distress and to help the dog learn along with their behaviour modification techniques. Your vet can discuss the most suitable option with you and your behaviourist.

If you suspect your dog is suffering, call your vet today.



***Sign of distress:
elevated heart rate***

Sign of distress: covering



Now you are familiar with the signs of distress. If your dog shows any of these signs, speak to your vet today.



Panting



Trembling/
shaking



Hiding



Refusing to eat



Vocalising



Yawning



Cowering



Flattened ears
and/ or furrowed
brows



Lip licking



Hypervigilant,
looking in many
directions



Owner seeking
behaviour



Restless pacing



"Whale eyes",
wide eyes with
white parts visible



Elimination
in the home



Destructive
behaviour



Elevated
heart rate



The trigger that causes separation issues is a simple one – it upsets your dog when you leave the house without them.

In this guide, learn more about separation-related problems in dogs, and what you can do to make your dog feel safe when left home alone.

Ask your vet for advice if you think your dog shows any signs of distress.



Sign of distress: lip licking

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