

SEPARATION ANXIETY (ISOLATION DISTRESS) TRAINING TIPS

WHAT ARE ISOLATION DISTRESS AND SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Isolation distress and separation anxiety are variations of a behavior problem that cause a dog to panic when left alone.

Just like in humans, these panic attacks are illogical. They may cause a dog to do things to self-soothe (such as whining, barking or howling or self-mutilating) or to attempt to escape to “safety” (to find their humans). Some dogs urinate or defecate out of fear. Others pace, drool, sweat from their paws, destroy exits or places that smell like their family or engage in other unintentional, uncontrollable behaviors.

Most dogs that are struggling with being alone have “isolation distress.” Isolation distress means a dog is comfortable as long as a human being, any human being, is with them.

Adding another dog to the equation rarely comforts a dog. Their distress is human-centric.

SUSPENDING ABSENCES

In order to overcome panic, we must prevent panic from happening. If we can prevent a dog with isolation distress/separation anxiety from ever reaching a point of panic, we can slowly, gradually acclimate them to longer and longer periods of time alone. This is one of the most important keys to our training.

To overcome isolation distress/separation anxiety, you must guarantee your dog that they will not panic. When they trust that this is the case, they will make progress. In the beginning, when your dog can only be alone for a few seconds or minutes without panic, they essentially cannot be without human company. As you progress in your training to 30 minutes, 1 hour, 2 hours and so on, you will slowly regain your freedom.

CONFINEMENT

For most dogs with isolation distress or separation anxiety, the use of a crate can make the problem worse. These behavior problems are often comorbid with confinement distress. Unless your dog absolutely loves being in his crate and rests there regularly throughout the day, you are likely to have more success leaving your dog loose in the house.

PRE-DEPARTURE CUES

Dogs are excellent at picking up patterns of behavior.

Most dogs with isolation distress/separation anxiety begin to panic even before you have walked out the door. They recognize the things you consistently do before leaving the house. Because these actions predict that you will be leaving them alone, the actions, themselves, become scary.

We call these actions “Pre-Departure Cues.”

In order to desensitize your dog to being alone, we must desensitize them to the process of leaving. Take a look at Sara’s pre-departure cues:



Before Sara leaves the house she puts on a jacket, puts on her shoes, picks up her bag and picks up her keys. Sara then unlocks the door and opens it. After stepping outside and closing the door, Sara then locks the deadbolt. Next Sara walks down one flight of stairs in her building, opens and closes the front door then opens and closes the gate.

Each action is a different pre-departure cue. You will want to integrate these into your training one day at a time (i.e., never add more than one pre-departure cue per day).

Your dog will notice and/or react to some pre-departure cues but not to others. If your dog alerts to the pre-departure cue you add, give them a few days to adjust to it before adding a new one.

DAILY TRAINING

Try working on your training 5-6 days a week for no more than 30 minutes at a time. Combine short steps away with pauses hanging out around the house as in the below example:

1. Put on shoes. Step out door, closing it behind you. Wait for 10 seconds. Return and remove shoes.

Pause for 30 to 90 seconds

2. Open door a crack (do not step outside). Close door.

Pause for 30 to 90 seconds

3. Put on shoes. Step out door, closing it behind you. Wait for 30 seconds. Return and remove shoes.

Pause for 30 to 90 seconds

4. Step out door, closing it behind you. Immediately return.

Each day make the training a little more challenging if your dog was comfortable with what you did the previous day. Move slowly! If your dog seems uncomfortable with one day's training, repeat the level of difficulty the next day or even decrease the challenge. You won't be able to move forward if your dog isn't on board.

Resolving panic won't happen overnight. Be patient and don't be afraid to reach out to friends and family for help. Your veterinarian, a Board Certified Veterinary Behaviorist and/or a Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer (CSAT) can help.

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