

# SEPARATION ANXIETY & DOGS

Separation anxiety is distressed behaviour often caused by the absence of a person or animal to whom your dog is usually strongly attached. Other causes can include moving to a new house, a changed routine and past bad experiences like abandonment, long-term boarding or animal shelters.

Dogs can display several signs if they suffer from separation anxiety, from changes in their body language, to house soiling, barking or howling when left alone, to more destructive behaviour like damaging property.

Owners who follow a set routine on most mornings may find that simple things can cause the dog to start fretting, such as the sight of your bag or the sound of car keys. This is because the dog is pre-empting your departure.

Dog owners are often unaware if their dog has separation anxiety because they are absent while the dog is distressed. Usually the only way owners find out that their dog may have a case of separation anxiety is from their neighbours or signs of destructive behaviour when the dog is left alone.

If you return home to find your dog has damaged your property, it is best to not punish the dog as this may in fact heighten your dog's anxiety. Instead, every effort must be made to relieve the tension caused when your dog is left on its own.

## When at home

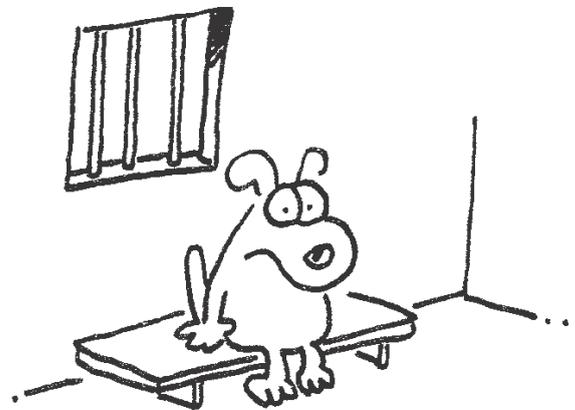
Dogs are highly social animals, so it is understandable that most dogs feel more secure when in the presence of their owners. Most dog owners would agree that having a dog trained and socialised from an early age can prevent social problems for the dog later in life, but it is important to be consistent no matter how well-trained the dog appears to be.

Have a routine of exercise and playtime with your dog. If the dog is well-socialised, encourage regular social outings at designated off-lead areas.

Provide a variety of toys and other stimulating items for the dog to play with.

Maintain who is the leader in your household. Don't allow any dog to follow you around everywhere in the home. This may seem cute at first, but in the long term it can increase the dog's dependency on its owners.

There is no simple remedy to treat separation anxiety; often a dog owner has to try a combination of things to find the best solution.



## Before leaving home

Don't pay too much attention to the dog before leaving and when you arrive back home, as this can highlight the act of leaving and returning in the dog's mind. Once the dog has settled after the initial excitement of you returning home, give praise for quiet behaviour.

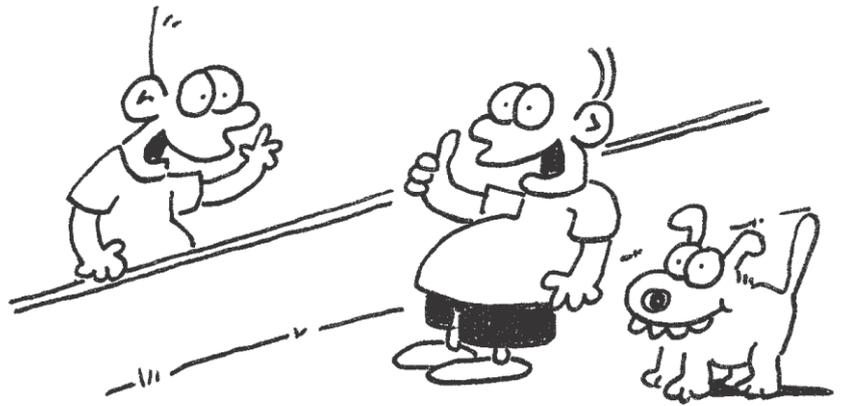
Give the dog something to look forward to when they are left alone, like a juicy bone or a treat.

If possible, leave the radio or television on for company. This can seem as though there is still activity in the home and can help relieve tension for the dog.

### Be persistent

Overcoming separation anxiety may take time so it can be beneficial to ask your neighbours to help you, or at least advise them that you are working on the problem so they can be more supportive, particularly in the case of noisy dogs.

Perhaps your neighbours can encourage the desired behaviour by offering the dog a treat when it is being quiet, or monitor the times when the dog is at its worst and keep you informed of any progress.



### Severely stressed dogs

Dogs that suffer minor separation anxiety may only be at their worst for the first 20 – 30 minutes after the owner initially leaves the dog on its own. For severely stressed dogs this process take a lot longer.

In some cases where there is significant damage to property, self-inflicted wounds, or even just excessive barking for long periods of time, dogs that are suffering from severe separation anxiety may need medication or similar types of therapy to keep them calm.

Talk to your local vet about available alternatives. It may also be worthwhile to ask a qualified dog trainer to provide specific advice for your dog.

### More information

The City of Palmerston produces a range of information sheets to assist responsible dog ownership. These include information about our off-leash area at Marlow Lagoon Pet Park, dogs in thunderstorms, animal management bylaws, and toys for your dog.

The information sheets can be found in the Library, at the Council office, and online at [www.palmerston.nt.gov.au](http://www.palmerston.nt.gov.au) in our publications section. For information, you can also call Ranger Services on 8935 9977.

This information is provided for advice only.

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