

Caroline Clark



SEPARATION ANXIETY IN DOGS

**UNDERSTANDING, PREVENTION & TREATMENT:
AN OVERVIEW**

About the Author

Caroline Clark is a registered veterinary nurse (RVN) with over forty years of experience working with and helping pets. Caroline is also a registered clinical animal behaviour counsellor achieving her post graduate diploma in companion animal behaviour counselling at Southampton University in 2006, where she studied under some of the world's leading authorities in the field.

In 2014 Caroline founded Pet Education and Training where she now divides her time between seeing clinical behaviour cases, mentoring budding behaviourists and providing online and in-person continuing education to students from the veterinary community and other pet professionals (www.petcourses.co.uk).

My book *Fear and Anxiety in Dogs* looks at understanding, preventing and ultimately treating common behavioural issues found in pet dogs, with the help of real-life case studies and illustrated step-by-step training guides.

Covering a range of issues, such as fear of noises, reactivity towards other dogs and people, separation anxiety and trips to the vets, this fully illustrated book is suitable for concerned dog owners, anyone working with dogs in a professional capacity or those with a genuine interest in canine behaviour.

Written by Caroline Clark

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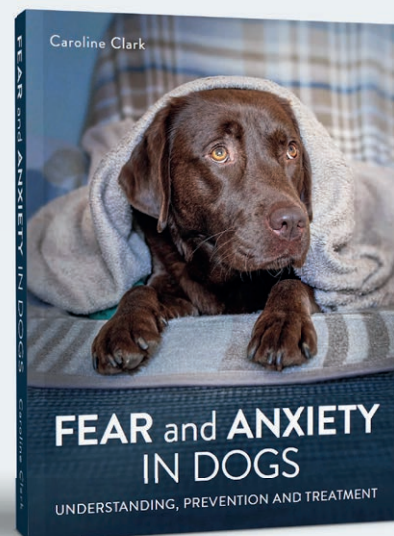
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www.carolineclarkauthor.co.uk

www.petcourses.co.uk



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Introduction

This e-book has been designed to help owners of dogs that suffer from separation issues. It will also be useful for helping dogs adapt when owners return to work after buying a new puppy or during a lockdown.

The e-book provides some basic information and useful tips and advice. However, because this canine behaviour problem can be complex and challenging, it has not been written to cover the subject in great depth or detail.

Causes of Separation Anxiety

There are many reasons why dogs become anxious when they are left alone and these may not always be just because the dog is anxious about being separated from the owner. Therefore it is important that the underlying cause is identified so that an effective line of treatment can be designed to suit the individual.

Causes or underlying reasons for separation related problems include:

- ▶ Fear of being trapped – the dog may feel confined (common in dogs that are kept in crates without proper, prior training).
- ▶ Boredom (leading to destruction).
- ▶ Anxiety about the owners' return – This can occur if a dog has been punished when the owner comes home.
- ▶ Loneliness – fear of isolation.
- ▶ Poor habituation to solitude (never been taught or experienced being left alone).
- ▶ Associating being left with a frightening event (e.g. the burglar alarm going off).

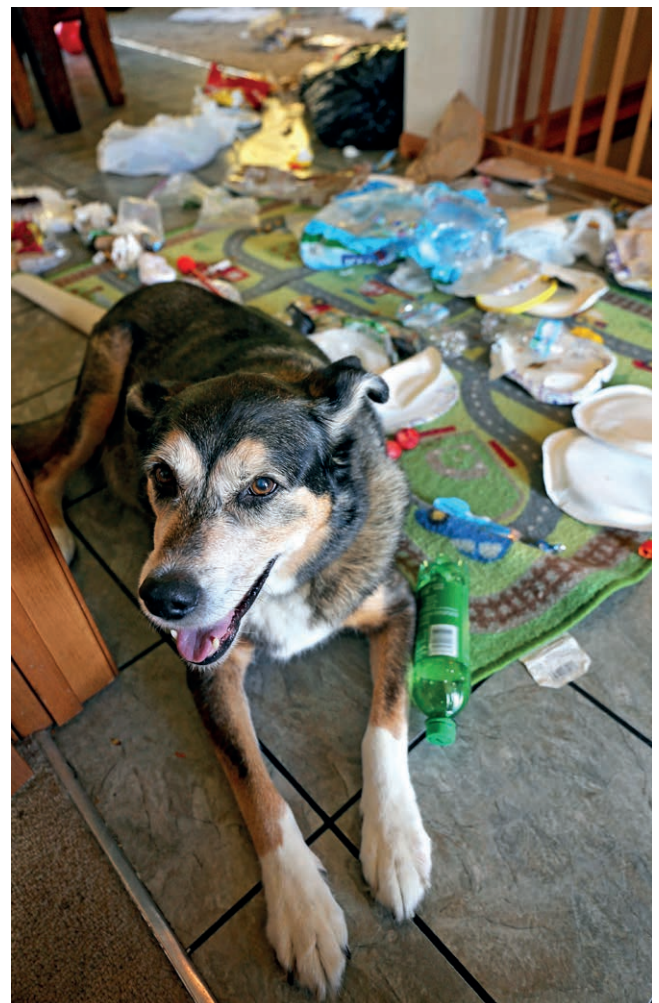
- ▶ Hyper-attachment issues.

In order to be sure that the correct diagnosis is made it is important to analyse all the symptoms. Sometimes a specialist in the field of canine behaviour is necessary to help with this.

Signs of Separation Anxiety

Signs of separation related problems are varied depending on the severity of the problem and can include:

- ▶ Anxiously following the owner around when they anticipate them leaving
- ▶ Signs of anxiety when the owner is



departing or at departure cues e.g. getting coat on, looking for keys etc.

- ▶ Maintaining a close proximity with the owner/s at all other times
- ▶ Over enthusiastic meetings (sometimes frenzied) even if only left for a few minutes
- ▶ Destruction (often focused on escape)
- ▶ Inability to rest and settle when left
- ▶ Pacing
- ▶ Self-harming
- ▶ Salivation
- ▶ Defaecation and urination
- ▶ Distress vocalisation
- ▶ Increased respiration/ panting
- ▶ Unnecessary seeking of reassurance whilst the owner is present

Categories of Separation Anxiety

1. Mild

The dog is clingy and shows mild anxiety when left but they are able to sleep and settle between episodes of anxiety.

2. Moderate

The dog shadows the owner and they find it difficult to rest and settle when alone. Greetings when the owner returns are frenzied.

3. Severe

Severe forms of separation anxiety are challenging and owners require long-term support. Symptoms are varied but as well as any of the above signs can include: salivation, loss of bladder and bowel control, constant

pacing, destruction and an inability to relax when left alone.

Even mild cases can develop in to more serious forms of separation anxiety so treatment should begin for all categories.

The over-riding emotions for dogs with separation issues is **anxiety**, **fear** and in extreme situations they can be **phobic**. Phobic reactions usually result in the dog self-harming and/or causing major destruction in the home in an attempt to escape.

Preventing Separation Anxiety

Dogs are a social species and given the choice, most of them would choose to have some company. However, to prevent stress and anxiety when you are absent, dogs do need to be able to cope with a degree of separation and isolation.

The old saying; '**prevention is better than cure**' is very true when it comes to canine behaviour. The best time to begin these techniques therefore is during puppyhood.

Introducing Puppies to Being Alone

Incorporate this training in to the puppy's everyday routines:

- ▶ Use baby-gates so that puppy does not continually follow and shadow you. To begin with make sure they can see you.
- ▶ Begin some very brief out of view departures – just for a few seconds to begin with. Always return before your puppy shows

any anxiety.

- ▶ Very gradually increase the time they are alone.
- ▶ Begin some crate training. Crates are fine for **short-term** confinement and can act as a safe haven/den but it is not good idea to use a crate for long periods or limit their freedom but it will help if you can habituate a puppy to the door being shut, just in case you need to do this for its own safety.
- ▶ Remember that confinement, without the appropriate training, can cause distress so make sure that **crate training is done sensitively and gradually**.

Quick Tips on Crate Training for Puppies

Incorporate this training in to the puppy's every-day routines:

- ▶ Make sure the crate is cosy and comfortable.
- ▶ Adaptil can help to create a calming environment (spray bedding or set up a diffuser nearby).
- ▶ Sit next to the crate, calmly and quietly, after they have had a play session or when they are tired and resting.
- ▶ Don't close the crate door to begin with.
- ▶ Regularly place treats and interactive feeders inside for them. This will help to make it a place that they associate with pleasant emotions
- ▶ Begin to briefly close the door – only for a few seconds. Drop a treat inside as a reward.
- ▶ Gradually increase the time that the door is closed.
- ▶ Over time, you can begin moving a short



distance away from the crate so they gradually get used to your absence.

- ▶ When puppy goes there by itself give it praise.
- ▶ Remember that crates are not to be used for prolonged confinement and should represent a safe and secure place to rest.
- ▶ Never use the crate for time out or as a punishment.
- ▶ Once you know your puppy has been habituated to being left alone you may decide to leave the crate door open so they can move freely.

General Advice

1. Start as you mean to go on

When first getting a puppy or adult dog always start as you mean to go on. Very often owners will take time off work to settle in a newcomer so human company becomes the norm for them. Afterwards, when returning to work, problems can arise because the dog has not been used to being left.

2. Teach your dog to rest and settle in a designated area

Encouraging a dog to settle in a bed/crate or designated area helps them identify that area as being a safe and secure place to be. This can increase their independence and help them realise that they don't always need to be with the owner.

3. Incorporate periods of isolation into daily routines

When working from home, aim to leave your dog for at least 10 to 15 minutes at intervals



during the day. Having them with you 24/7 for the most part and then leaving them for longer periods can be confusing for them.

4. Provide your dog with rewarding activities that they can engage in without you being present

Mental activities can include homemade or commercial activity feeders, snuffle mats or Kongs stuffed with wet food.

5. Use baby-gates to control your dog's movements

Baby-gates are useful in preventing your dog from shadowing you. This helps build their independence and emotional resilience.

Treatment for Separation Problems

Treatment varies depending on the individual and on the severity of the problem. One size doesn't fit all!

The general treatment that underpins a behaviour plan is **Systematic Desensitisation (DS)** and **Counterconditioning (CC)**.

DS, in this context, means very gradually getting the dog used to being left alone. This has to be done sensitively.

In severe cases, work should begin by desensitising a dog to being in the area that they will ultimately be left and should not involve leaving them alone.

CC is a technique used to change the dog's negative response of being left alone to a more positive or pleasurable response.

During training, this can be achieved by:

- ▶ Making sure the environment is relaxing.
- ▶ Providing very tasty food in interactive

feeders and toys.

- ▶ Using natural food supplements that enhance mood (always get advice from a veterinary surgeon as certain supplements like St. John's Wort can interfere with other medications).
- ▶ Incorporating herbal aromas in to their environment (but don't overwhelm them with powerful scents).
- ▶ Using pheromones to create calmness.

Using DS and CC techniques, the plan of action might look something like this:

- 1.** Practice **insight departures** using baby-gates (this may be only for a matter of seconds to begin with). Gradually the duration can be extended.
- 2.** When the dog is coping with in-sight departures work can begin on very brief (seconds) out of sight departures (not leaving the house). Begin to extend the time that the dog is alone but only if the dog is coping and making progress.
- 3.** Videos that can be viewed in real-time can be used to ensure the dog is not showing signs of becoming distressed during rehearsed departures. It is **IMPORTANT** that you return **BEFORE** they become anxious.
- 4.** Work can now begin on staged departures leaving the house. Again, use videos to see the dog remotely, always returning before the dog develops any signs of anxiety.
- 5.** Eventually extend the length of time the dog is left.
- 6. Be prepared to go back in the plan.** Sometimes progress can be slow or a dog might take a few backwards steps. This may be due to a dog's mood state or you might have gone a bit too fast.

Treating Severe Cases

Severe separation anxiety is a very challenging behaviour problem. As such, it is recommended that help from a suitably qualified counsellor is sought.

The latest evidence shows that these dogs respond much better if they are not left alone whilst they are undergoing the treatment plan.

The reason for this is simple. If the dog is beginning to make some progress and starts to feel relaxed with being left, its progress will suffer if, in between training sessions, it is left for periods of time that it cannot cope with.

If you cannot take the dog to work with you, consider doggy day care or leave them with a friend or family member until such a time that they have progressed to being left for longer periods.

For some people, this may not be an option. In these cases a discussion with your vet about suitable prescription medication to be given alongside a treatment plan might be necessary.

General Advice & Other Useful Tips

- ▶ Regular short training, using positive reinforcement has been shown to help reduce anxiety. Simple cues are best to start with (sit, down, paw). Always make sure that training is done at times when the dog is feeling calm.
- ▶ Introduce them to some simple interactive puzzle feeding games and praise them when they independently interact with them. The idea is to encourage self-sufficiency which builds confidence.
- ▶ Don't have prolonged goodbyes– this can

increase anxiety. A brief but comforting cue such as 'see you soon' said in an upbeat and calm tone is usually adequate.

- ▶ Observe your dog to see what triggers their anxiety. Often this precedes a departure (e.g. wearing work clothes) Once identified you may be able to control, manage or remove them (e.g. changing in to work clothes at your workplace).
- ▶ Confinement can raise anxiety for some dogs and may be a cue to being left alone. If they are not destructive give them more space but do create a den for them in a place they usually chose to rest in.
- ▶ Leaving a new predictive signal, that gives your dog certainty that you will return, forms part of something called the CALM protocol. This has been devised by a veterinary behavioural specialist. You can learn more about this concept here <https://reconcilefordogs.com/calm-programme>
- ▶ Radio and TV as background noise can be useful. Choose a station with soothing music.
- ▶ White noise can be effective for some dogs but make sure any recordings you download are checked for suitability beforehand.
- ▶ Record the normal conversations and background house noises. Playing them when you are out will help provide some familiarity in the environment.
- ▶ Mental and physical exercise helps to tire the dog – take them for a walk and give them a mental task to do before (and whilst) leaving them.
- ▶ If the dog has destroyed anything whilst you are out – DO NOT punish them when you get home. This can increase their anxiety and make the situation worse.
- ▶ Regardless of what they have done in terms

of any destruction, you should act happy and relaxed.

- ▶ When you arrive home greet them and provide support but be fairly low key to discourage frantic behaviours.
- ▶ Adaptil is a synthetic pheromone that helps to induce calmness. Plug it in the vicinity where the dog rests and spray it on some items of their bedding.
- ▶ A piece of your clothing containing your scent may provide some comfort.
- ▶ Ask your behaviourist/vet about other natural and holistic treatments that might help alongside a treatment plan.
- ▶ Do not expect to see overnight results.

Summary

Separation Anxiety in all its forms is challenging. Therefore making sure that you take measures to prevent it developing is important. Hopefully this e-book has given you some useful ideas to help. However, severe cases are extremely challenging and can impact on a dog's welfare. For that reason, seeking the help from a suitably qualified professional is important.

Want to learn more?

My short, veterinary approved, recorded webinar provides a comprehensive overview of this complex behaviour problem, with treatment plans, based on the latest scientific evidence.

It includes helpful training guides, factsheets and links to scientific research.

Find this course and more online at:

www.petcourses.co.uk



Training Progress Diary

For Separation Anxiety



Helpful for tracking your dog's progress. While improvement should be seen over time, occasional uncontrollable events or emotions may cause temporary setbacks—these can be noted in the 'comments' section.

Below is an example of a part-completed diary, demonstrating how it might be filled in. Learn more through my online Separation Anxiety webinar.

In View: i.e. behind a baby-gate **Out of View:** i.e. unable to see or get to you

Date / Time	Duration (length of time alone)	In View / Out of View	Observations	Comments
1st July 9.30am	5 minutes	Baby-gate closed in view (IV)	Using snuffle mat. Some evidence of mild anxiety at 4.5 minutes.	Startled by noise of barking outside. Moving to the baby-gate (will reduce to 4.5 minutes tomorrow).
2nd July 9.30am	4.5 minutes	As above	Searching for kibble.	Music playing in background. Good progress. Another session this afternoon and increase time.
2nd July 4pm	5 minutes	As above	Happy to find scattered treats.	Good progress - no external noise.
3rd July 10.30am	5.5 minutes	As above	Settled in bed and licking filled Kong.	Good progress.
4th July 12pm	4 minutes	As above	Busy finding scattered kibble for first 3 minutes then ran out of food.	Showed some mild anxiety at 3 minutes due to no food. Will make sure return earlier when food runs out.
4th July 6.30pm	3 minutes	As above	Window cleaner arrived.	Licked stuffed Kong whilst window cleaner outside. Great progress. Returned sooner to prevent problems.



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