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## Preventing Separation Distress During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Our pets are family members, and during the pandemic so many pet owners have been at home with their pets more than ever before. Spending most of our time together can increase the human-animal bond, deepen our relationship with our pets, and connect pet owners with the veterinary team in ways we never predicted. One prediction we can make though, is that as we return to work and life outside the home after this period of constant connection, our pets may be at risk for developing or displaying signs of separation distress.



### What is separation distress?

Separation distress, or separation anxiety, means the pet experiences a feeling of anxiety or even panic when they are separated from preferred people. The signs most commonly associated with this disorder include vocalizing, salivation, destructive behavior especially at exits like doors and windows, urination or defecation indoors/in unwanted locations, lack of appetite when alone, self-trauma like licking or chewing when alone, and attempted or successful escapes.

In severe cases, pets may even break through fences or windows, chew through walls or doors, and engage in other dangerous behavior when they are feeling panic. Often, the signs of anxiety such as pacing, panting, jumping up on the owner or attention-seeking, avoiding confinement areas, or trying to escape begin when the owner first starts preparing to leave home (brushing teeth, picking up keys, lacing up shoes, etc.).

If your pet is showing the signs listed here, tell your veterinary team right away. A doctor's diagnosis is needed to confirm separation distress or separation anxiety disorder. The good news is, there is a lot we can do to help prevent separation distress, and to treat it if it occurs.

### How can I meet the needs of my pets?

Pets need their daily needs met in order to remain both physically and mentally healthy. Of course, proper nutrition, medical care, and grooming/husbandry are at the top of the list. Some other crucial daily needs of companion animals:

- Protection from undue stress or fear
- Physical exercise (cats, too!), including individual maximum speed at least once a day

- Mental stimulation (including foraging, training using positive reinforcement by building the skills you want your pet to have a little every day, playing structured games, solving puzzles, social interaction, exploring novel environments)
- Social interactions with family members
- Time for calm rest/Alone time (unless this causes distress)

Developing a routine that includes a plan for meeting the needs of companion animals on a daily basis is so important. Routines build predictability which helps life to feel more stable and less uncertain. Stability reduces anxiety in people and in animals. It can be difficult to maintain routines such as daily walks, playtimes, rest times, work and mealtimes during the pandemic: both for people and for pets. The routine does not need to be strict, meaning the same activity at the same time every day, but it should be regular, allowing time for each activity each day. Maintaining a routine can help protect against separation distress once the family is spending more time away from home.

### How can I tell if my pet is showing signs of stress?

Common body language signs of stress in dogs include: refusing treats, takes treats roughly when normally gentle, dilated pupils/wide eyes, furrowed brow, ears held down or to the side, pacing, panting when not hot, shaking off when not wet, licking lips in the absence of food, yawning when not tired, look/move away from stressors, tail held low or tucked, head held low, looking away or moving away, being overly solicitous, attention-seeking (jumping, pawing, licking), fidgety (cannot settle), moving slower than normal, tense muscles, trembling, and vocalization.

Common body language signs of stress in cats include: refusing treats, takes treats roughly when normally gentle, dilated pupils/wide eyes, furrowed brows, head lowered, ears held to the side or back, whiskers held flat to the cheek or far forward, move away/desire to escape from stressors, faster breathing without exercise, tail held close to body, attention-seeking (rubbing, climbing, scratching), crouching, leaning away, swishing tail.

Body language of stress is mentioned here because any training program to either prevent or help with separation anxiety should be kept non-stressful for the animal. This means staying “below threshold.” **Threshold** is described as the stage at which a pet reacts to something. For example, imagine two dogs are 20 feet apart. One dog moves closer, and when the distance is 10 feet, the other dog begins to bark. The barking dog’s threshold for not reacting to the approaching dog in that moment was 10 feet, and the barking dog is now “over threshold” and needs help returning back to a calm state.

**"Body language of stress is mentioned here because any training program should be kept non-stressful for the animal."**

When working on the exercises in this handout, “below threshold” means the animal is not showing any of the signs of stress mentioned above, and appears willing and comfortable to participate. Never intentionally put the pet in a stressful situation. Forcing a learner to “confront his fears” is called flooding. **Flooding** can result in emotional harm that is difficult or impossible to reverse in some cases and is too risky to include in training and behavior modification exercises.

## How can I teach my pet to be on his/her own?

Teaching pets to be on their own without being overly attached to a specific person is helpful in building their coping toolbox to adapt to changes in schedules and lifestyles. This is called **Independence Training** and it teaches the pet to be comfortable when the owner moves away or is absent, and to relax without needing to follow the owner each time they move. This may reduce the risk of hyper-attachment.

The following are types of Independence Training.

### **Downtime**

Build time into the day for your pet to nap or relax without planned interaction. Offer a chew, food dispensing toy, stuffed treat holder, or meal in the desired “downtime” location. Tethering or anchoring the food dispenser in some way can be helpful in encouraging your pet to remain in one place and prevents him/her from following you while carrying the food treats along for the ride.

If your pet is comfortable, simply provide the distraction/reward device and move on with your activities. If your pet shows stress body language, such as those described in the above table, stop the exercise and start more slowly.

To build the Downtime exercise when your pet is accustomed to being near you and shows signs of worry, start by staying near the downtime mat, bed, etc. with your pet. Quietly encourage them to interact with the food toy, or reward them with small low to moderate value food treats for remaining on the mat. The exercise needs to be kept short enough and at a close enough distance that your pet shows no signs of stress (stays “below threshold”). Over time, both the distance between you and your pet and the duration of the exercise can be extended while keeping the pet below threshold.

The Downtime exercise helps build and maintain the habit of spending time alone engaging in quiet, calm, and relaxing behaviors without the your company.

### **Go to Place**

This is a helpful exercise teaching the pet to move away on their own, settle in a designated location such as a mat, bed, crate, room, or pen and remain there. Go to Place has many useful applications.

## How can I teach my pet these new skills?

Use positive reinforcement to teach any new skill to pets. Two examples of teaching Go to Place are **luring** and **shaping**. It is recommended that clicker training is used for teaching new skills for both dogs and cats. Clicker training is simple: Click when your pet is doing exactly the right thing. After the click, give a treat! A click is both a marker saying “YES! That thing!” and an IOU for a cookie.

### **Luring: Follow the treat to learn the skill**

Choose a quiet area to work, and place the mat, bed, crate, platform, etc. in the location you want your pet to go.

Start by standing right next to the place.

1. Point to the place and drop one treat on the place.
2. When your pet goes to eat the treat, click when they touch the place and drop another treat.
3. Toss a treat away from the place to reset the exercise.
4. Repeat step 1 and 2 until your pet easily comes quickly to the place when you point.
5. Fade the lure: Point to the place. Your pet will come quickly to the place. Click, drop a treat on the place. Now is a good time to add a word cue as well such as “Mat” “Bed” “Kennel” “Place” etc.
6. Toss a treat away to reset the exercise.
7. Add the step of “down” on the place.
8. Begin gradually stepping away from the place. Send your pet from one step away, then two, then three.

If at any time your pet shows hesitation, confusion, or lack of progress, take a step back to the most recent level of difficulty that was successful and try again. The above plan may take two minutes or twenty sessions depending on the situation. Let your pet set the pace!

**Shaping: Guess the right next step to earn a treat, building the skill in baby steps**

Shaping is a terrific way to teach new skills if the learner is savvy to training and the owner has the patience. Shaping is similar to the “Hot and Cold” game many children play. A complex skill is taught by rewarding baby steps toward the goal. At first, the *smallest* step in the right direction receives a click and treat, and as understanding improves, bigger steps toward the goal behavior are required to receive a click and treat.

Set up your workspace as above.

Stand in a relaxed neutral position near the go to place. Look at the place but do not hold eye contact with your pet so they feel free to move around and experiment. Observe your pet’s behavior and watch for any of the following:

1. Look at place
2. Turn head toward place
3. Walk toward place 1 step
4. Walk toward place multiple steps
5. Lean over place
6. Sniff place
7. Touch a paw or nose to place

Each of these “guesses” is “hotter” and getting closer to the Go to Place skill! Each one receives a click and treat. Consider rolling or tossing the treat a short distance away from the place to reset the learner for a new attempt. The next level most pets offer includes:

1. Touch a paw to place for 1–2 seconds
2. Touch more than one paw to place
3. Stand on place
4. Sit on place
5. Down, or other known trick on place
6. Remain on place for longer periods of time

For those steps, click, drop a treat onto the place, then toss or roll a second treat away to reset for a new attempt.

Once your pet is choosing to go to and remain on the place, introduce a **pointing and word cue** to send them to their place. Then, begin adding distance so your pet is being sent away from you and settling in their designated spot.

Having trouble? Slow down and accept smaller baby steps. “Split” the baby steps down and watch for the smallest guess that could lead to a right answer. It is never wrong to reward a baby step! But it can cause problems if rewards are withheld while waiting for a leap in understanding.

## **I'm heading back to work soon and I'm wondering how I can prevent separation anxiety with my pet. What can I do now to prevent problems in the future?**

The above Independence Training techniques can be used to teach your pet to be on his/her own. The following tips can also help your pet with your transition back to work.

### **No Drama and Departure Cues**

Especially if we have been staying home much of the time and rarely leaving the house, departure cues like lacing up shoes, picking up a wallet or handbag, or jingling car keys send pets the message loud and clear that we plan to leave.

When you are stuck at home, pick up your keys now and then. Get dressed in your running shoes or work shoes even if you are not going anywhere. Then stay home and watch a movie or cook dinner. Try to avoid pairing specific actions and activities with infrequently leaving home. The goal is to prevent creating a link in the pet's mind between departure cues and feelings of anxiety about being alone. Practicing these techniques for pets without separation distress helps protect against developing it in the future – especially now when our routines may be significantly changed.

**"Try to avoid pairing specific actions and activities with infrequently leaving home."**

When you are getting ready to leave, no drama, and the same when you return. Be calm, reassuring, and relaxed. Acting sad when you leave, giving lots of attention around the time of leaving, and having a huge party when you return home may be linked to increased pet anxiety about being alone.

### **Practice Separations**

Practice separations help assess if pets are comfortable being left alone. At first, practice separations may be only a few seconds long. Practice separations are a good way to teach pets that the owner moving away means wonderful things are coming.

Select an area where your pet will be safe such as a crate, room with a baby gate, bed in a pet-proofed room, etc. Smile, and calmly say something such as “I'll be back.” Toss a few treats and then step away out of sight where your pet cannot get to you, by closing the crate, going behind the gate, or going behind a closed door. Start with just a few seconds at a time, and gradually work up to longer separations.

## Longer Separations

If you are not sure if your pet is comfortable alone, a video camera is a terrific tool to check in. Home monitoring cameras (see handout “Watching Your Watch Dog: Home Pet Monitoring Systems” for more information), baby monitors, cell phones, webcams and more can watch your pet while you are away. Simply set up the separation and make sure the video is running. Check in on your pet remotely or review the video when you return. Start with just a moment or two, then gradually work up to longer and longer separations.

## What can I do if separation is causing anxiety?

If you are concerned your pet may have separation distress or separation anxiety, reach out to your veterinary team. Observe your pet’s responses to things like departure cues, provide videos of what happened when your pet was alone, and keep a journal of your pet’s behavior. All of this information will help your veterinarian establish a diagnosis if appropriate. While you are waiting for your appointment, avoid leaving your pet alone. Dog walkers, daycares, pet sitters, safe trips along with the owner, working from home are all emergency options while working toward a diagnosis.

**"If you are concerned your pet may have separation distress or separation anxiety, reach out to your veterinary team."**

Separation anxiety can be treated. Usually treatment involves the use of medications, management (NO separations or alone time during the first several weeks of the treatment period at minimum), independence training, and an extremely gradual program of safe departures. Support from professionals gives families the best possible chance of helping pets decrease the signs of separation anxiety and have a safe, good quality of life.

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