

## Helping your dog overcome separation anxiety post-lockdown

**A**fter months spent at home due to the government-imposed lockdown, many people have been afforded more time with their pets than ever. Whilst this sounds like a dog owner's dream, returning to work after so long could be quite the adjustment for your four-legged friend, and could leave them suffering with separation anxiety if they are suddenly left alone for hours each day.

Separation anxiety in dogs can be exhibited in many ways, from constant barking or whining to scratching and chewing or displaying any other strange behaviour that they would not normally show when calm.

It's important that you prepare your dog for the change that is coming to minimise the stress that may be caused. Here are some of the steps you can take to help your dog feel more at ease.

### Start to leave him or her on their own more

It may seem counter intuitive, but the easiest thing to start getting your dog back to a regular routine is to actively practice leaving them on their own whenever possible before your return to work. For example, if you are going for a shower or going shopping, try placing your dog in a safe and secure room on their own whilst you do so, being sure to follow a similar routine to the one your dog will have become familiar with before lockdown.

It is important to do this slowly, so start off by leaving your dog alone for as little as one to two minutes at a time and see how they react. If your dog responds well, you can gradually increase the time you leave them alone for as they adjust.

When you do this, it can help to give your dog a treat or activity toy to keep their mind on something else, as this can help build a positive association with being left alone.

### Normalise being left alone

The more you repetitively leave your dog on their own for short periods of time throughout the day more they will, just like a human, become desensitised to the situation. Make sure you do something to symbolise that you are leaving so your dog can build an association with the action.



This will help your dog view you coming and going as a positive act and will build it into a 'normal' routine in their brain, reducing the chances of separation anxiety when you eventually go back to work. Make sure you slowly increase timings as it is crucial that your dog feels comfortable during the normalisation process.

### Give your dog plenty of exercise

Taking your dog for a half an hour walk, doing some training or other form of exercise before leaving them alone will help expend some energy and make them feel a little more physically and mentally tired, diverting their attention to food and sleep. This means they will be less inclined to expend energy and become 'worked up' whilst you are away. The more energy your dog has when you leave for work, the more likely they are to feel stressed and anxious until you return.

### Don't make a fuss

Whenever you leave to go to work or arrive home, it is important that you make the event as boring and mundane as possible for your dog, and downplay 'hellos' and 'goodbyes' so they don't view them as something they need to react to.

You can achieve this by making sure you are not overly animated when you greet them. This does not mean you have to ignore them and you can still give them some love and attention, but try to keep it as an insignificant part of your daily routine as far as your dog is concerned.

### Leave comfort items and background music on

When you go to work, leaving items that carry your scent like dirty laundry can help your dog relax and remember that you are going to come home. Remove any stress factors like collars or crates if your dog doesn't like them and consider hiding treats around the house so they can keep themselves busy trying to find them while you're away. Leaving the radio on or playing soothing nature sounds can also help your dog relax and fall asleep so they don't even know you have gone.

When anxious, dogs experience the same feelings that we do as humans when we are worried or scared, which isn't pleasant at all. By taking the necessary steps to prepare and build a regular routine, you can ensure the transition back to work is as easy as possible, not just for your dog, but for you too.

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