

Brain & Cognitive Disorders

# Tips to Comfort Cats and Dogs with Separation Anxiety



Some pets exhibit anxious behaviors when left alone. This is known as separation anxiety and is a response to being separated from the person (or in some cases another pet in the home) with whom the pet has developed a strong bond.

Behavioral signs of separation anxiety include:

- improper urination or defecation in the house not associated with puppy or kitten training
- excessive barking or howling in dogs or meowing in cats
- destructive behavior in the home

If your pet is exhibiting signs of separation anxiety, follow these steps to help your pet become more comfortable when home alone.

## 1. Encourage separation at home.

It is important to spend quiet time with your pet each day where you give your pet undivided attention, which helps nurture your bond and rewards calm behavior. However, it is also wise to create separation periodically while you are home to help your pet adjust to being alone. For some pets, a closed door can create separation, while other pets may need time in their crates or to be encouraged to spend time alone in a calm, quiet part of the house for part of the day.

## 2. Schedule time for play and exercise.

Schedule times to play with your cat or dog each day and reward good behaviors. An occasional small treat while playing, along with verbal praise, can be very beneficial.

Taking your dog for a walk or playing an interactive game with your cat is another calming strategy. After exercise, pets are usually ready for a nap, which provides an opportunity for you to leave.

## 3. Make leaving and arriving home uneventful.

To encourage calm behavior, avoid lengthy goodbyes and exuberant greetings when you return. Keep in mind that pets can take cues from your body language. If you struggle with short goodbyes, try saying goodbye with petting and praise as much as 10 to 20 minutes before you leave. Then, when the time comes to leave, you can leave quickly because you have already said goodbye.

## **4. Provide some background noise.**

Music or sound from a television, audiobook, or podcast can provide pets with engagement and distraction. Dedicated pet channels are available with pet-centric noises or images to help keep dogs and cats entertained.

## **5. Try stimulating puzzles and games.**

Mental exercise is just as important as physical exercise for pets. Keep your pet occupied with interactive toys while you are away. Puzzle feeders are a great way to reduce anxiety and keep your pet mentally stimulated. Pour half of your pet's daily portion of dry food into the puzzle feeder each morning and then refill with the balance each evening. Your pet will spend the day busy and engaged, which can ease feelings of anxiety.

Another option is to divide the daily amount of dry food into small portions and hide those portions around the house. This hide-and-seek game is particularly beneficial for cats, as it encourages their hunting instincts and keeps them busy and active throughout the day.

Provide a stimulating environment for your cat, such as hiding places and vertical spaces (climbing trees, perches, shelves), to explore while you are away.

## **6. Talk to your veterinarian.**

Your veterinarian is the best person to talk to when it comes to your pet's separation anxiety. For dogs, your veterinarian may recommend a supplement that can support calm behavior, such as a probiotic containing the proprietary strain *Bifidobacterium longum* NCC3001 (BL999), alpha-casozepine (derived from milk), or L-theanine (from tea). A Purina study showed that anxious dogs supplemented with the strain of *Bifidobacterium longum* showed a reduction in anxious behaviors. Another Purina study showed the proprietary strain of *Bifidobacterium longum* reduced stress and associated behavior, e.g., pacing, in cats. Alpha-casozepine or L-tryptophan may also help reduce anxiety in cats.

A vest, shirt or wrap that applies light, constant compression may be helpful in some pets (similar to calming a baby with swaddling). If your pet's signs are severe, your veterinarian may recommend a behavior specialist and/or medications.

Following these tips can help ease your cat's or dog's separation anxiety and make your pet feel more comfortable being home alone.

The Purina Institute aims to help put nutrition at the forefront of pet health discussions by providing user-friendly, science-based information that helps pets live longer, healthier lives.

