

# Separation Anxiety and the “Pandemic Puppy”

## What Lies Ahead After Lockdown

by Valarie V. Tynes, DVM, DACVB, DACAW

FOR MANY PEOPLE, THE YEAR 2020 WILL BE REMEMBERED WITH SADNESS. For some, it will be remembered as a highly stressful time in which they faced many new challenges; for others, it will be remembered as the year in which they added a new companion to their home.

A recent poll from the University of Michigan found that about 10% of US adults adopted a new pet last year. Pets provide comfort when we are stressed and they provide companionship for those who have been deprived of their usual social interactions because of the pandemic lockdown. Some of these new “pandemic pups” may have never experienced separation from their owners. Many owners working from home will have spent much more time than usual with their pets, and even pets who were in homes prior to the pandemic may be in for an abrupt shock when their owners go back to working away from home.

How do these sudden changes affect our pets? Many people have expressed concern that we will see a surge of dogs with separation anxiety after the lockdown ends. What are the odds that a dog who has spent every waking hour with their owner for 6–12 months will have a problem when their owner suddenly begins leaving the home for 8–10 hours each day? The fact is, we do not know.

Although canine separation-related distress is one of the most studied canine behavior problems, little data has come to light that really helps us to predict who may develop separation-related problems or how to prevent them.

### **Pathophysiology**

Separation anxiety has traditionally been defined as marked distress that occurs only in the absence or perceived absence of the owner (attachment figure). The classic clinical signs associated with separation anxiety include vocalization, destructiveness, and house soiling.

Other behavioral and physiological signs may include:

- Panting
- Pacing
- Salivation
- Hyperventilation
- Gastrointestinal signs such as vomiting and diarrhea
- Some dogs demonstrate a more depressed response, where they become withdrawn and completely inactive
- Some dogs exhibit extreme levels of panic and escape behavior that results in self-trauma. This is especially common in dogs who are crated when their owners leave them
- Most dogs will not eat when alone. They often run to their food soon after their owners return and begin eating. If the owners leave the dog a special treat but come home to find it untouched, this raises the index of suspicion for separation anxiety

Other characteristics that have also been associated with separation anxiety include increasing anxiety that is demonstrated when the owner goes through their routine departure preparations, excessive greetings upon return, and what is often described as “clingy” behavior when the owner is home. However, it has been discovered that all three of these features are not consistently present in every dog who demonstrates separation anxiety.

Owing to these differences in presentation, there is some question as to what the underlying pathophysiology may be for this problem. Is every dog diagnosed with separation anxiety experiencing anxiety because they are separated from their owner or are they experiencing some other emotional state, such as fear or frustration? Without a better understanding of the motivations that result in the problem, we remain at a loss as to how to prevent it from occurring.

Numerous studies have investigated whether dogs with separation-related problems experience insecure attachment to their owner that may be analogous to the human parent-child dynamics that leads to distress when a child is separated from a parent. Thus far, the results have been inconclusive, but they do suggest that “hyper-attachment” is not necessarily the cause, as not all dogs with separation anxiety exhibit hyper-attachment and not all dogs with signs of hyper-attachment exhibit separation anxiety.

Until more is known, prevention of separation anxiety must be aimed at attempting to “teach” dogs that being alone is not an unpleasant state and monitoring as needed to confirm that the dog does not have separation-related problems. What is known is that because of the nature of learning, dogs who experience distress while alone or confined will experience a general worsening of that distress if the situation is allowed to continue. Thus, early recognition and appropriate intervention when the problem is first noted will likely be most effective.

### **Diagnosis**

The best way (really the only way) to accurately make a diagnosis of separation anxiety is to have the pet owner collect a few minutes of video of their dog’s behavior after the owner has departed the home. Without video, if the owner is only basing their concern on the signs of destruction, house soiling, or neighbor reports of vocalization, then many dogs can mistakenly be diagnosed with separation anxiety when in fact they are experiencing distress associated with other outside stimuli such as vehicles, people, or animals passing by the home. House-soiling dogs are often misdiagnosed with separation anxiety when, in fact, they have never been completely house-trained.

Worse yet is that, if an owner does not see the expected signs of destruction or house soiling, they may remain blissfully unaware that their dog is suffering. It is very likely that many dogs begin demonstrating signs of anxiety associated with being left alone long before the problem becomes so severe that destruction and house soiling develop. Unless an owner lives where others can hear and report, they may never know that their dog is vocalizing when left alone.





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Collecting video is not difficult since almost everyone nowadays has a cellphone, and most cellphones can take photos and record videos. Clients might balk at your request to have them leave their phone set up to capture video of their dog, but they simply must be taught how to do this safely. The clinician must impress upon the pet owner that they only have to leave for 10–15 minutes, but they must actually leave the home. They can walk or drive around the block a few times and then return, but they must leave the dog alone as they normally would to get video that accurately portrays their dog's behavior after he is left alone.

Even if the dog is not left confined, capturing video of the area surrounding the owner's exit point can still be helpful. Most dogs with separation anxiety remain in the general area for a few minutes or run to look out windows. If the dog leaves the viewing area of the camera, you can often still hear an anxious dog whining on the recording as he moves about. If minimal footage of the dog is captured the first time, the clients should be urged to try again, aiming the camera at the area where they suspect the dog goes after they depart.

Once some representative video recording is captured, then all that is left to do is evaluate the video. Most owners will recognize if their dog is anxious or not. However, giving them some specific things to look for may help. Dogs who pace and pant or vocalize at all are probably anxious. If they paw at the door or nervously walk from the door to a window, they are likely anxious. If anxiety is confirmed, it may help to encourage the owner to come up with a way to view their pet at home for longer periods of time.

At some point, knowing how long the dog remains anxious will aid in monitoring treatment. Owners might consider purchasing some type of WiFi-enabled video camera. These are readily available online and are inexpensive and easy to use. They can be home security cameras or “nanny cams,” whatever is convenient for the owner. These cameras can be invaluable for monitoring the effects of different treatment modalities and the dog's improvement over time.

### **Treatment and Management**

Management of separation anxiety should first be aimed at trying to prevent—to the extent possible—the anxiety that the dog is experiencing. It is the repeated experience of anxiety, in a particular place and under particular circumstances, that leads to the continual worsening of the condition. Obviously, this can be challenging, since most people cannot quit their jobs and stay home with their pet 24/7 because he is experiencing separation anxiety.

It is equally critical that pet owners be reminded what they should *not* do, which is to start confining the dog to a crate to prevent further damage to their home. Dogs who repeatedly tear out of crates not only cause severe harm to themselves, but, as explained earlier, repeated experiences of distress in the crate only makes their anxiety associated with confinement worse.



The options that can be helpful include:

- Taking the dog to daycare—assuming the dog likes to be with other dogs and a good, reliable facility is available.
- Taking the dog to a friend or relative who stays home.
- Taking the dog to work. It is increasingly common for many workplaces to allow people to bring their dog to work with them, and this can be an excellent option, at least for the short term.
- If they cannot do any of the above and the dog is causing damage to the home, then one consideration is to find a location in the home that is different from where the dog has been left previously, such as a laundry room, bedroom, or bathroom, and leave the dog in that area. A video should first be collected of the dog alone in that area to determine that the dog's anxiety is at least decreased from what it is when left in other locations.

Pet owners should be encouraged to recognize these options as short-term considerations that help prevent their dog from experiencing anxiety while they begin other forms of treatment. The other forms of treatment include pheromones, nutraceuticals, and anxiolytic medications. This treatment has been well documented elsewhere and is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that a trial and error approach will likely be required in order to find the right intervention or combination of interventions that will adequately decrease the dog's anxiety when he is left alone. In addition, routine monitoring by video will be necessary to confirm that the dog's anxiety is truly under control.

### Prognosis and Prevention

Successful treatment of separation anxiety can be challenging. Most studied interventions (medication and pheromones) have been shown to *decrease* the signs associated with separation anxiety in most cases. Complete resolution is less common. In addition, behavior modification, often aimed at teaching the dog to be more independent or decreasing responses to departure cues, can be challenging for many owners. Also, if not performed correctly, some of these exercises can make the dog's behavior worse. Many pet owners may need the assistance of a qualified positive-reinforcement trainer to help them with behavior modification.

Attempts to prevent the problem should focus on teaching the dog that it is not just safe to be left alone

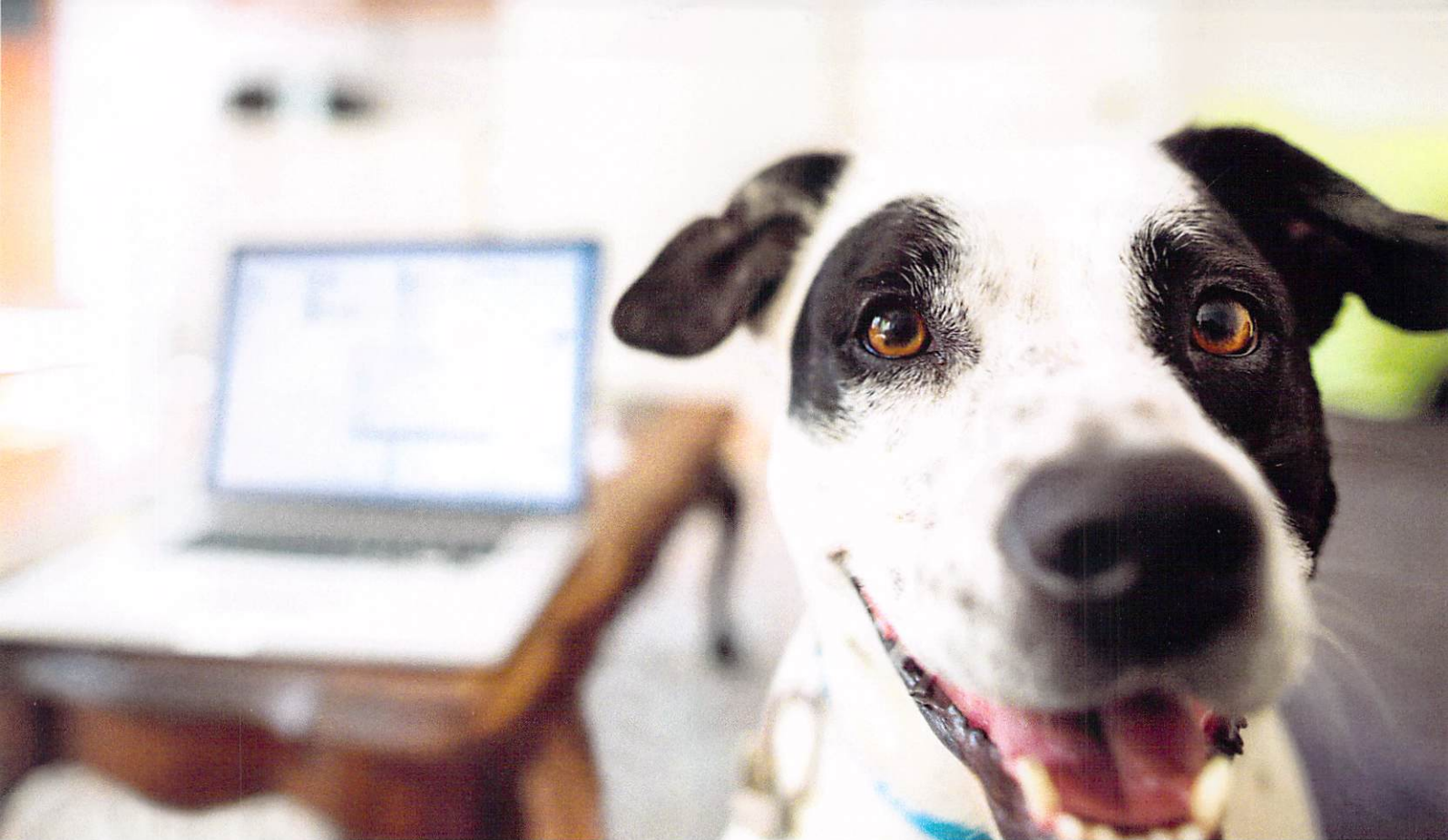
but that it is a wonderful thing! When dealing with puppies or dogs who are new to the home, the pet owner should be sure that, if using a crate or similar means of confinement, the dog is very comfortable with being confined. If the dog:

- Acts at all hesitant to go into the crate or must be forced inside, then it must absolutely not be made to stay in the crate. Forcing the dog into a crate when the dog is already fearful or unhappy about being in the crate will definitely make the problem worse!
- If the owner comes home to find that the dog has destroyed bedding or damaged the crate, separation problems should be suspected and video should be collected of the dog alone.



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## Additional Tips for Preventing Separation Anxiety

- Owners should avoid leaving the dog suddenly for 4–8 hours, especially if the dog has not been left alone for any length of time.
- Departures should be very short at first and the behaviors of the dog should be the guide. Owners might start with a 2- to 3-minute period of leaving the dog alone. This could just mean confining the dog in the crate or closing a door between the owner and dog while the dog eats his meals.
- Length of departures should then be gradually increased a few minutes at a time. Once the dog has been shown to be calm and anxiety free for the first hour, then it is likely that it will be OK for several hours, but the next departure should be limited to 2–4 hours. These lengths of departures should be repeated a few times before going to 8-hour departures.
- If the dog is a puppy, the length of departures should be limited according to how long the pup can hold his bladder. As a general rule, most puppies can only hold it for about 1 hour per month of age. Therefore, an 8-week-old puppy can probably not go more than a couple of hours without eliminating. A 12-week-old puppy can probably only wait about 3 hours. If you leave a puppy confined for longer than he can comfortably go without eliminating, this can teach the puppy to dislike being confined.
- Every departure should be associated with some type of special treat. For very short departures, owners might consider a few small pieces of treat, but as the departures are lengthened, the treat should be something that will keep the dog busy for a longer period. Stuffed Kongs or similar food toys are ideal for this. If treats such as these are reserved for times when the dog is alone, they will eventually learn to associate these “good things” with being alone.
- Avoiding a lot of drama associated with departures and arrivals may be helpful and will certainly do no harm. This does not mean that people must ignore their pet, only that they should avoid making a big fuss. Getting the dog excited prior to departing may simply leave the dog in a high state of arousal, which is not conducive to the calm, relaxed feelings that we would like the dog to have when alone. Getting the dog very excited about arrivals can reinforce excited behaviors and only emphasizes the contrast between owner presence and owner absence, possibly making it harder for the dog to continue to associate being alone with feeling great.



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Crates should never be used as punishment for the dog. It is very difficult to teach dogs that being crated and left alone is a wonderful thing if the crate is also used for punishment.

### Looking Ahead

We have yet to discover if the coming months or years will reveal a larger than usual population of dogs with separation anxiety, but when it comes to behavior problems, prevention is always easier than the cure. So, don't wait; remind new pet owners now that they should be preparing their dog for more hours of alone time and working hard to make alone time more pleasant for the dog. We all love that our dogs love us and want to be with us, but separation anxiety leads to an enormous amount of suffering for dogs. So, it is ultimately in everyone's best interest that some time and effort be invested in teaching dogs that it is OK to be alone. ※



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