

# Caring Vets

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## Separation Anxiety

Problem behaviour may take weeks or months to resolve depending on severity of symptoms and duration of the problem. Here are a few helpful techniques.

### Changing the predictive value of pre-departure cues

There may be cues that your pet associates with you leaving. For example picking up the keys or walking to the front door. We need to desensitise your pet to these cues. 2 to 4 times daily you need to run through the usual cues of leaving without actually leaving. Your pet will be desensitised when there is no longer an anxiety response (eg panting, pacing, following, increased vigilance) associated with the cues. Disassociating these cues with departure will help diminish the anxiety response.

### Graduated planned absence and departures

This technique is only employed once your pet no longer respond to any cues of departure. It uses short absences to teach your pet how to be left at home. Departures must be short enough not to elicit a separation distress response. The goal is to teach your pet that you will return from your departure.

Departures must be like real departures BUT you will leave a safety cue (eg radio or TV left on or ring a small bell) on these planned departures. The safety cue must not be used on departures where the length of time is not controlled (eg going to work).

Initially departures must be very short 1-5 minutes. The length of absence is gradually increased in 3-5 minute intervals if no signs of distress (eg vocalisation) are present at the shorter interval. A good way to monitor for signs of distress is to leave a tape recorder going on record to pick up any vocalisation.

Now you need to intersperse to longer (5-20 minute) and shorter (1-3 minute) intervals. Once your pet can be left for 2-3 hours on a planned departure you can start trying day trips.

The safety cue can be slowly phased out over time or used indefinitely.

### Independence training

The aim of independence training is to teach your pet to be more independent of you. All the attention that your pet gets must be at your initiation. That is no attention on your pet's demand. Attention must be earned by your pet performing a task such as sitting. When at home teach your pet to stay in a location separate from yourself and minimise following behaviour.

### Classical counterconditioning

A further technique for helping dogs recover from separation anxiety is classical counterconditioning. It requires you to leave a special treat or treat stuffed toy on departure. This technique helps turns your departure into a positive experience.