



Chicagoland Veterinary Behavior Consultants

INDEPENDENCE AND DEPARTURE EXERCISES FOR SEPARATION ANXIETY



The Goal of These Exercises Are to Teach Your Dog to Be Comfortable Alone and Feel Safe When Away from You

Teaching your dog to feel comfortable and safe when left alone requires independence and relaxation training. Dogs that have a tendency toward separation anxiety also learn to recognize and respond to our "departure cues" (like taking a morning shower, picking up keys, putting on jackets and shoes), and may begin to show anxiety even before being left home alone. You can desensitize your dog to these departures cues and help your dog respond with calmness, if you gradually teach your dog over time that it can handle these departures.

To be successful with Separation Anxiety behavior modification techniques, working with a qualified behavioral trainer is necessary. Behavioral trainers are very different than obedience trainers. They possess a much different skill set and utilize behavior modification techniques instead of obedience training. We will provide you with a referral to a qualified behavioral trainer to work on these exercises.

Because Separation Anxiety is difficult to treat, there are many treatment methods that can be used. Not all dogs need all the exercises and protocols in this handout. Your behavioral trainer will work with us to determine which exercises are best for your dog. The trainer will also help monitor the pace of training and help you learn proper technique so that the behavior modification process is not overwhelming.

A Note About the Body Language of The Anxious Dog

Learning slows/ceases when anxiety rises to a visible level; so, a dog that becomes anxious during these exercises is not actually learning to be independent. During the mat training and the subsequent exercises, it is imperative that your dog is calm and relaxed, enjoying his treat when you are not present. This requires you to keep a close eye on how relaxed he really is, intervening at the first sign of anxiety.

Some common signs that he is too anxious to learn: panting heavily, staring intently in your direction, whining/barking, or getting up to follow you. Your dog may have additional signs of anxiety that you have noticed in the past. Include these on your list of things to watch.

Independence training begins with teaching your dog that calm behavior works!

Calm behavior makes all good things in life happen. Teach your dog that calm behavior is what brings your attention and your return. To get started, avoid responding to demanding behaviors such as barking, whining, jumping, pawing, etc. When this happens, briefly ignore your dog. To avoid inadvertent reinforcement of these undesired behaviors. Please do not look or speak to your dog, do not touch or push your dog away or down.

However, do not leave your dog in a prolonged vacuum of frustration. Try not to ignore your dog for more than 15-30 seconds. Wait for a tiny bit of calm behavior, such as the moment your jumping dog's feet hit the floor, or your barking dog stops barking for just a second. The moment your dog's feet hit the floor or skip a moment of barking, give a signal to the dog that they are doing the right thing, by saying *YES-SSS*, and rapidly follow with a treat, attention and affection. If the dog jumps or barks again, ignore briefly again, take the briefest moment of 4 feet on the floor and repeat the *YES-SSS* signal and again reinforce with a treat, attention and affection.

Initially, the undesirable behaviors will get worse as your dog tries harder to get your attention. If necessary and the demanding behaviors are too intense, you can walk away from dog briefly. However, if you consistently do this, things will get better over the next 1-2 weeks. Everyone in the family must do this as well. If not done consistently, and inadvertent reinforcement continues, the frequency of these behaviors will not decrease. Your dog will not learn that calm behavior works.

Play the Triple R Game

Once you have developed some basic [life skills](#) with your dog using [marker-based \(clicker\) training](#), you will be ready for the next level of helping your dog learn that calm behavior is what works. Now we will not just wait for your dog to offer a tiny bit of calm behavior, we will be requesting your dog to perform calm behavior.

To learn how this works, please read the Instructions for [The Request-Response-Reward \(R-R-R\) Game](#)

Treat Games

When new responses are difficult to achieve, start out with something simple and fun. These games can help change your dog's emotional response to the area your dog stays when alone, to your departure, and to being home alone.

Play the "I'll Be Right Back" Game

1. Sprinkle treats on the ground or on her mat in her safe room and say I'll be right back.
2. Leave the room and then reappear at the entrance to the safe room.
3. Wait for calm, ask for a simple behavior such as sit, and sprinkle more treats.
4. Once again cue, "I'll be right back"
5. Move a short distance away and return before your dog gets upset—again sprinkle treats.
6. Repeat but gradually add distance and eventually short periods where you go out of her sight.
7. The goal is to never leave your dog longer or farther away than what your dog has learned as safe, so that your dog never gets upset during this game.

Play the Treasure Hunt Game

- The goal is to hide multiple high value food items throughout the housing area (or safe place) to encourage your dog to actively engage their olfactory (smelling) senses to earn reinforcement.
- In having to actively search and seek out the food items, it compels your dog to think thoroughly and not resort to panic or giving in to impulse.
- To have good results, you'll want to practice this exercise several times a day to solidify a positive association to the housing area before you begin to use this when leaving for extended periods.
- By continuing to practice the exercise when you are home, it will become a reliable departure cue that will allow your dog to learn that it's safe and OK to be alone.

For Multi-Person Households: if your dog gets upset if one family member leaves, even though the other stays,

Teach Your Dog That a Valued Person's Departure Is A Good Thing.

- The goal is to teach your dog that one of you walking away predicts something good will happen
- This game requires 2 people to play
- Do not go proceed farther or faster than what your dog can handle.
- End each session on a high note, when your dog is being successful.
- This game should be played repeatedly over several weeks in short 2-3-minute sessions.

- If your dog is becoming distressed or not doing well, it is a sign of:
 - you are going too fast, training too long in a session
 - your food rewards are not high enough in value
 - your rate of reinforcement is too low.
 - You need to break things down into smaller steps.
- Person One should have some treats for and have the dog on a loose leash.
- Person Two should walk 10 feet away.
- As Person Two walks away, Person One begins to rapidly hand out treats in rapid succession to the dog to create a positive association with Person Two walking away.
- If the dog displays signs of distress as Person Two leaves, decrease the distance that Person Two walks away.
- Then Person Two gradually goes further away as the dog gets more comfortable at each new distance.
- Practice each new distance repeatedly until you are certain your dog can handle it and is ready for more.
- You may also use a clicker or a verbal marker, to mark for small increments of calm behavior followed by treats to reinforce.
- After 30 seconds away, Person Two returns to the dog.
- When Person Two is returning, all clicking and treating STOPS!
- Wait 10 seconds, with no clicks, treats, or play, then repeat.
- Clicks and treats only happen when she is leaving!
- Gradually increase the time Person Two can stay away from the dog
- When the dog is comfortable with Person Two 10 feet away for a minute, next increase the distance Person Two can walk away by a foot.
- Work up to going out of the room, then out of sight, then out of the house.
- Temporarily decrease the time Person Two stays away, and work back up as Your dog is becoming comfortable with Person Two being out of sight
- Next reverse roles and start the game again!

Methods to Teach Calmness, Focus, Impulse Control and Relaxation

Relaxation on a Mat

This is one of the most useful skills you can teach any dog. This simple exercise teaches your dog a behavior that will help relax her while reducing her stress levels by noticeable amounts. It can also help reduce attention seeking behaviors and helps your dog know what to do, rather than getting excited when guests arrive, or demanding attention when you are busy. Start training this behavior in an area of low distraction. Practice it well during low stress times and then very gradually start to practice in areas of higher distraction or stress.

- a. Start by training your dog to go to its place or to a mat: [5 Steps to Train Your Dog to Go to Place](#)
- b. The next step is to teach your dog to: [Relax on a Mat](#). It is an important read to truly understand the concept relaxation. This concept is far different than an obedience down stay.
- a. You may find it easier to use this handout to get a quick start: [Mat Relaxation Training.pdf](#)
- b. Here is a video example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvSm62fmqSM&t=1s>
- c. Here is another good example, if the volume is soft on this video, it can help to click on the Closed Caption CC button, and read the instructions
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQORii_5ckE
- d. This video shows a few more video examples of what we are looking for in a relaxed dog: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2NpvhUKAR8>
 - Head down
 - Legs cocked to the side,
 - Laying on their side

- Slowing breathing, taking a deep sigh

- **Using Mat Relaxation for Separation and Departure Training**

As your dog gets better at relaxing on the mat, begin to move away from your dog by taking a couple of steps away, waiting for a short period of time, returning to the mat, and releasing your dog. When you get back to the mat, wait a few more seconds before giving your dog a release signal, rather than releasing immediately. Gradually increase the distance that you walk away from him. Eventually, work your way up to going to the next room and coming back a short time later. Then, gradually increase the time you are out of the room while he is on the mat.

Practice moving the mat (therefore your dog) throughout the house. The gradual approach is also appropriate in these exercises. The goal is that he can be on a mat relaxing in a bedroom or the office by himself while enjoying a treat.

If your dog gets up from his "relax" at any time during these exercises, do not punish him; instead, calmly return to the mat and ask your dog to lie down again. Start the next session with a shorter time and/or shorter distance away. This training should be done in

short sessions daily and should be made part of your daily routine. Exercises can easily be performed while watching television, washing dishes, sending emails, etc.

It may help to track your progress with a journal of the time and distances during these exercises.

Below Are A Series of Video Examples That Demonstrate Training Independence

Demo Dog: Iliana- 3-year-old, Malinois

Trainer: Debbie Martin, RVT, VTS-Behavior, KPA CTP

[Video #1: Clicker Training down relax on a mat:](#) In this video the distance of the owner from the dog and the duration of the relax is varied. The click is given when the owner is at a distance from the dog. The treat is tossed to reset the dog for the next repetition. Prior to adding duration and distance the dog was taught to go to the bed on cue ("Place").

[Video #2: Remote treat dispenser to reward relaxing on the mat:](#) A Manners Minder (remote treat dispenser) is used to reward the dog for remaining on the mat, while the owner walks away. The owner has a remote that controls when the machine dispenses the treat. This also disassociates the reward from the owner.

[Video #3: Tethered food storage toy to help teach independence:](#) A food stuffed toy is tethered to a fixed point by the dog's bed. The owner is then able to gradually move away to help build independence. The toy is tethered to prevent the dog from picking it up and following the owner.

- **Dr. Karen Overall's Protocol for Relaxation**

- This protocol is a set of biofeedback exercises designed to teach dogs to relax while stuff happens around them.
- The protocol is designed to go at the dog's pace.
- Dogs should be able to hold a relaxed sit or down for 15 seconds prior to starting the protocol.
- It's important to realize that this is not an obedience exercise.
- The goal is relaxation, not merely compliance with the stay.
- This means that owners should not progress to the next task set until the dog is able to be relaxed through the current task set, regardless of the dog's ability to hold his position.
- If the dog chooses to slide into a down from his sit position, it should not be corrected for doing so.
- It can be helpful to start this exercise with the dog lying on a mat.
- You may choose to speak softly to your dog through the whole protocol or to remain quiet: it depends on which is most helpful to your dog's relaxation.
- Experiment with your dog and see what works best.
- Move slowly and smoothly while doing the various tasks and reward your dog after each individual task.
- Over time, the Protocol for Relaxation can bring about a powerful change in dogs who could not previously relax.
- As your dog learns to relax in the context of the protocol, you can help him generalize this behavior to new environments by taking your dog's mat on the road and going through the protocol in new locations.

- Remember to decrease your expectations when you go anywhere new, and always be ready to leave if you determine that you've pushed your dog too far.

A Good Video Explanation of how the Protocol for Relaxation works is in this video: <https://vimeo.com/19875523>

- At first this protocol may seem tedious and time consuming, but it can work if you are willing to follow it.
- Using the recorded MP3 Files of the protocol versus trying to read the protocol and work it at the same time make this MUCH EASIER to follow.

Below are links to Dr. Karen Overall's PROTOCOL FOR RELAXATION:

- [The Full Written Protocol from Dr. Overall's textbook](#)
- [The Relaxation Protocol Audio Files](#)

- **Additional Calming Strategies**

- Article: [Training Hyperactive Dogs to Calm Down](#)
- [Video: Teaching Your Dog to Focus](#) tracking a simple object like a toy can help a dog practice focus.
- [Teach Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath--A Biofeedback Method for Relaxation from Dr. Karen Overall](#)

Video Example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DlxELL4FkWI>

Gradual Practice Departure Training:

- **Not all dogs will require this level of training.** Many dogs will respond well to anti-anxiety medications, enrichment of the home alone environment, and independence and relaxation training. Departure training is slow and can feel tedious, but in severe cases, it may be needed.
- Before starting gradual practice departures, it is important that you have already worked with a behavioral trainer to develop your dog's life skills and have helped your dog learn the relaxation and independence techniques mentioned in this handout. For best success, continued guidance with a behavioral trainer is needed.
- **The goal is to gradually build practice departures, using a special SAFETY CUE** (a sound or scent and or visual or verbal cue) **and practicing these safe departures in a different style and setting** than your normal work day departures, to help your dog learn that departures need not produce anxiety. Just as dogs with separation anxiety learn to recognize and respond to their owners "departure cues" (and show anxiety and panic), they can also be trained to recognize a "safety cue" (and learn to respond with calmness because they have learned over time they can handle these departures).
- **Planned Practice Departures Will Appear Different Than Real Life Departures In 3 Ways.**

First: the departures are going to initially be very short and never long enough to distress your dog.

Second: when you depart for a practice run, you will leave a new, unique and consistent cue or signal.

Third: You will leave your dog in a different location and you will leave through a different door than the one that currently takes you away, so that there are no prior negative associations in place.

- The "cue" or "safety signal" could be an air freshener scent sprayed in the air, a visual cue like a towel placed over a door knob, an auditory cue such as special music, or a unique verbal cue that is only used for these practice departures.
- The goal is for a positive association to develop between your new departure style, the new signal, calm behavior and wonderful consequences for remaining calm such as extra delicious treats.

- This time alone initially needs to be measured in seconds or minutes, not hours, so that we do not push the dog beyond the panic threshold and allow the dog to engage in any separation related behaviors (drooling/pacing/panting/whining/barking/house soiling/destructive behavior).
- We want to set the dog up for success, so we never leave it longer than what the dog has learned to handle.
- The length of the departure is slowly increased at 3-5-minute intervals, with short departures that are interspersed with longer ones, to vary the time left alone, and avoid the dog predicting what is going to happen.
- The increase in departure time must be irregular, and not a continuous progression so that the dog does not become anxious by predicting your return.
- The new signal or cue is only used on a planned departure, NEVER when you must be gone for long periods of time that still cause distress such as going to work.
- **If your dog is destructive or engaged in any of her separation-related behaviors during a planned gradual practice departure, then you are moving too fast and were gone too long.** The next departure must be shorter, and more practice at a successful level needs to be done before moving forward again.
- You cannot quickly go from a 20-minute planned departure to a 3 hour one. This can elicit separation-related distress and may render the safety cue useless. When doing this at the correct speed, it will feel very boring, as the dog is never upset or panicked. Resist the temptation to push forward faster when if you are seeing success.
- The goal is for the safety cue to provide the dog information: "you are going to be alone but it's OK because this length/type of departure is one you have already learned to calmly handle".
- A journal to assess progress and treatment success can be helpful, and Videos can be extremely helpful!
- **Video Example: Desensitization to Planned Departure:** This is a training session to teach the dog to become comfortable with the steps leading up to an actual departure. It is a combination of the relaxed down on a mat with departure cues. Safety cues (music and bed) signify to the dog that this is training. Until the owner has progressed in training to being able to leave the dog for gradually longer periods of time, the safety cues would not be used with an actual departure. Thee training should be gradual, and the dog should remain relaxed at all times.