

# Coping with pet separation anxiety



"People often misconceive the misbehavior as pointing at you," says Betsy Saul, co-founder of [petfinder.com](https://www.petfinder.com).

Symptoms of pet anxiety, or your pet's response to fear of abandonment, may be confused with a lack of training, but it's important to remember that separation anxiety does not mean your pet is ill-behaved, Saul says.

Behaviors include going the bathroom in inappropriate places, persistent barking, howling, chewing on items, door frames or window sills, digging at doorways, and pacing and trying to escape when separated from their guardians. Separation anxiety can be a particular problem for dogs that have changed homes before being adopted into their current families. So if these behaviors sound familiar, follow these steps to help your furry friend relax:

## **1. Promote independence and shake up their routine**

Pets often become anxious when their owners have suitcases or keys in hand.

"Dogs can't read a clock, but they definitely understand the passage of time," Saul says.

Counter this fear of abandonment by shaking up your routine. This could include grabbing the trash or laundry basket before you go to work, making your pet think you are leaving for only a short time.

Practicing gradual departures can also help your pet. Collect your belongings and say goodbye, but only leave for a few minutes. Increase these trips by five or 10 minutes at a time, and your pet should become comfortable being alone. You can also keep a journal to note the anxious times, Saul says.

## **2. Exercise your pet before you leave and provide entertainment**

Before you leave, take your pet on a walk or play with it. A tired pet will be less likely to stress when you leave.

Also avoid leaving your pet in a crate all day, and leave your pet with "extended play toys" or a pet-sitting video for entertainment, Saul says.

### 3. Get another pet

Get your goat. No, really, you should. Horses are infamous for anxiety, so it's common place for goats to be alongside them for companionship and peacefulness, Saul says. Even chickens can have anxiety, she adds. "This is not a dog-centered thing," she says. "It's really important to promote independence, but getting another pet can go a long way."

You should also make your pet's world bigger than just you by introducing it to other animals and people.

"Nobody's world should be that one-dimensional [by only being around the owner]," Saul says. "It's not healthy."

Doggie daycare is now an affordable option, or you can take turns pet sitting with neighbors.

### 4. Get some help

Pet separation is a serious and real issue, and it's sometimes difficult to curb solo. Just keep in mind that if you hire a trainer, he or she should not punish the animal because this is not a behavioral issue; it's simply the animal's reaction to fear.

"This isn't about training," Saul says. "The most well-trained dog could have separation anxiety. So this is not a time to punish because then that just creates more anxiety."

Too many animals end up in shelters because of the confusion between behavioral and anxiety issues. Don't let your pet be one of them.



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