

What should you do when dogs have separation anxiety?

A couple of weeks after I adopted my dog, Halle, I realized she had a problem. When left alone, she would pace, bark incessantly, and ignore any treats I left her in favor of chewing my belongings. When I returned, I'd find my border collie mix panting heavily with wide, fearful eyes. As frustrated as I was, though, I restrained the urge to scold her, realizing her destruction was born out of panic.

Halle's behavior was a textbook illustration of separation anxiety. Distressed over being left alone, an otherwise perfectly mannered pup might chomp the couch, scratch doors, or relieve themselves on the floor. Problem behaviors like these tend to be interpreted as acts of willful defiance, but they often stem from intense emotions. Dogs, like humans, can act out of character when they are distressed. And, as with people, some dogs may be neurologically more prone to anxiety.

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So concluded a recent [brain imaging study](#), published in PLOS One, in which researchers performed resting-state functional magnetic resonance imaging on 25 canines that were deemed behaviorally "normal," and 13 that had been diagnosed with anxiety, based on a behavioral evaluation. The scans revealed that anxious dogs had stronger connections between several of five brain regions that the researchers called the anxiety circuit: the amygdala, frontal lobe, hippocampus, mesencephalon, and thalamus. The team also saw weaker connections between the hippocampus and midbrain in anxious dogs, which can signal difficulties in learning and might explain why the owners reported decreased trainability in these dogs.

That the neurological architecture of anxious dogs seems to parallel the signatures of human anxiety comes as little surprise to many animal behavior experts. "There is no reason to suspect that the basic neuroanatomy of dog psychopathology is any different from humans," Karen Overall, a board certified veterinary behaviorist at the University of Prince Edward Island, told me in an email. Indeed, dogs have been found to exhibit [several mental conditions](#) similar to those in humans, including anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and Alzheimer's-like cognitive dysfunction.

Yet, pet owners will often use punishment to try to bring a misbehaving dog to heel — perhaps yelling at them, jerking them with a leash, or strapping a shock collar around their neck. Trainers, who are not subjected to [regulation or licensure requirements](#), can be seen in YouTube videos yanking dogs on slip leads to quiet their barking. If evidence suggests that many dogs, like many humans, misbehave because they are struggling with emotions and anxiety, why do so many pet owners and trainers look to punishment as the solution, rather than addressing the emotions directly?

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thing that anxious people need: help managing and reducing their distress.

Part of the problem might be that it can be difficult to recognize our pets' feelings. Emotions manifest in our mannerisms. And so, as Overall describes it, the same anxieties and pathologies we see in humans will likely show up differently in a species that walks on four feet, uses their mouths as hands, and lacks verbal language. Early signs of canine anxiety can be as subtle as lip licking, yawning, or staring into the distance. It's no wonder that many pet owners don't notice their dogs' distress until it takes on more problematic forms, like excessive barking and peeing indoors. Even aggressive reactions like growling and snapping at other dogs or people are likely rooted in fear.

While punishment can sometimes stop these behaviors, it can also backfire. Several studies have documented a link between punishing training methods and [increased aggression](#) in dogs. Scolding a dog might stop it from growling, for instance, but it won't assuage the underlying anxiety, and it doesn't give the dog information about what to do instead. The dog might go silent but then bite a person with no apparent warning, or act out in other ways. If anything, forceful punishment may deepen the animal's anxiety, Overall said. A dog that may have merely *felt* threatened before the punishment knows, afterward, that a threat really exists.

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The foundation of this approach is changing the dog's environment to set them up for success, Vanessa Spano, a veterinarian with Behavior Vets in New York City, told me. If a dog is barking at other dogs or people on walks, for example, it might help to walk them at less busy times or locations. Often, vet behaviorists will supplement training and environment management techniques with antidepressants, especially when a dog is consistently stressed. Otherwise, Spano says, it's like trying to administer psychotherapy to a person who's having a panic attack: "All that advice, just like all that training, is going in one ear and out the other."

Once a dog's distress is under control, they can often learn to overcome their anxieties through methods like systematic desensitization. Just as someone with arachnophobia might pet a plush toy tarantula as a first step to overcoming their fear, studies suggest that incremental exposure — reinforced with treats and games — can help pets build positive associations with the stimuli that cause them anxiety. For dogs with separation anxiety, studies suggest that a gradual process of acclimating them to increasing periods of separation, complemented with strategic snack offerings, can help them [learn to cope](#) with alone time. The use of antidepressants to calm anxiety has been shown to further increase success rates.

After recognizing Halle had separation anxiety, I embarked on a version of this process. For four months, I avoided leaving her alone at all, which meant frequently using dog sitters and daycare. (Although many cases of canine separation anxiety can be eased in six weeks or so, I had some early setbacks.) Then, I worked on desensitizing her to my departures: I started by simply opening and closing the front door while she gnawed at a bone; once she was able to handle me stepping out the door, I began to leave for gradually longer times. Now, she comfortably naps on the couch when I'm away.

In the future, there might even be more options for pet owners who seek to treat their dog's anxiety. Yangfeng Xu, the lead author of the PLOS One study, is now working with colleagues to study how dogs respond to magnetic brain stimulation, a technique that has been used to treat depression in humans. The treatment showed promise in one early [case study](#), seemingly calming anxious-aggressive behaviors in a male Belgian Malinois. A couple of weeks after the second treatment, the dog dropped his habit of lunging at other dogs and people, and Xu said he is still behaving well three years later.

To some people, it might seem excessive to extend this type of care to animals. But some vet behaviorists argue that by being more attentive to pet mental health, we humans can improve our own wellbeing. "If we treat non-humans we'll increase our capacity for compassion for all animals," Overall told me — humans included. Personally, I found that as I became more attuned to Halle's emotions, I also grew gentler toward my own anxieties. I stopped beating myself up over feeling burnout in my writing career, for example, and I have instead grown more curious about my emotional responses to stress.

For that, I have a nervous border collie mix to thank.

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