

# Home Alone Again?

*Return-to-Work Prep: A 4-week program to ready your dog for your return to work/school*



Deb Helfrich  
Gold Star Dog Training LLC  
[deb@goldstardog.com](mailto:deb@goldstardog.com)  
[www.goldstardog.com](http://www.goldstardog.com)



Jill Halstead  
Follow the Leader Dog Training  
[dogtrainingvermont@gmavt.net](mailto:dogtrainingvermont@gmavt.net)  
[www.dogtrainingvermont.com/](http://www.dogtrainingvermont.com/)

This information is for educational purposes; some dogs require assessment by a professional behaviorist and/or veterinarian and this material is not intended to replace that advice.



# Welcome!

## Worried about how your dog will fare when you return to activities outside of the home?

Even though covid-19 has placed much stress and many restrictions on us, our dogs have enjoyed having their humans spending significantly more time at home.

It's likely that some of these dogs will develop separation anxiety once their people start to resume activities outside of the home. Some dogs who suddenly start spending long hours home alone after months of not using their "being alone" muscles might be especially at risk.

## *We're here to help!*

Jill (Follow the Leader Dog Training) and Deb (Gold Star Dog Training) have teamed up to bring you a 4-week program to ready your dog for your return to work, school, or anything else you may need to leave home for.

## The goal is to prevent/lessen separation anxiety.

Every week, we'll post a new lesson, complete with exercises.



Don't miss a weekly lesson! Follow us:

<https://www.facebook.com/goldstardogtraining>

# Week 1: The Separation Test

This week, you have two tasks:

- **Understand the signs** of separation anxiety
- **Test out your dog** to see if s/he acts any differently when s/he is left home alone. We want to find out if s/he does anything while you are gone or when you return that is noticeably different.

## 5 cardinal signs of separation anxiety

1. Pre-departure panic as well as frantic greetings upon return (not just "Hey, I missed you!" but "OH, MY GOD! I was FREAKING OUT!")
2. Owner-absent anorexia (won't eat even the greatest treat when totally alone)
3. Having accidents in the house even though totally potty trained
4. Destruction at exit points in the house (windows and door frames are common places)
5. Self injury (dog is bloody or injured) from trying to escape



*You're leaving?*



Humans sometimes interpret destruction of furniture, bedding or non-exit points (e.g., doors, windows) as signs of separation anxiety. While they can be, more often than not, these are symptoms of boredom.

# Week 1: The Separation Test (Cont.)

## Now let's run a test

Do what you would normally do when leaving for work/school. Have a shower, get dressed, drink your coffee, gather the items you need for your day, pick up your keys, and leave.


Stay outside and out of sight so you can hear your dog if s/he starts to bark, cry, or howl. These CAN be signs of separation anxiety but may not necessarily be. If your dog vocalizes, wait two or three minutes to see if s/he stops. If s/he does not, you will know that s/he needs help with shorter absences.

If your dog sounds distressed at the three-minute mark, go back inside (keep your greeting blasé and low key). If your dog is quiet, wait ten minutes and go back inside and assess your dog. Look for any signs of separation anxiety (from the previous page) or anything else that your dog may have done.

Make notes about how long your dog vocalized before calming down and anything you found when you went back into the home.

### Tasks for this week

- Understand the signs of separation anxiety
- Test out your dog to see if s/he acts any differently when s/he is left home alone.
- Write down your observations

 **Next week** Use what you learn to figure out what next steps to take with your dog's return-to-work readiness plan.

# Week 2: Levels of Separation Anxiety and Next (Baby) Steps

Last week's homework was to figure out how long your dog can be home alone comfortably without the humans being home.

The amount of time your dog can be comfortable alone, as well as your dog's responses to being left alone, are what we use to determine next steps (and if your dog needs more than this program).

We are focusing on **preventing** separation anxiety. Giving your dog lots of very brief—and then slightly longer and longer absences during the day—will help him/her build those “home alone” muscles.



*I'll be napping while you're out!*

## Tasks for this week



- Start to build your dog's “home alone muscles”
- Refer to your notes from last week and the chart on the next page to figure out where to start

# Week 2: Levels of Separation Anxiety and Next (Baby) Steps (Cont.)

<p><b>Your dog showed NO SIGNS of separation anxiety</b></p>	<p>Your dog was relaxed when you left, made no sound (or stopped after a few minutes), and seemed content and happy when you returned, with no signs of distress or destructive behavior.</p>	<p><b>Your task: Add more time</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Add one or two hour-long absences to your routine going forward. If that is not possible, do the best you can with shorter absences throughout the day.</li></ul>
<p><b>Your dog showed MILD SIGNS of separation anxiety</b></p>	<p>Mild separation anxiety can loosely be defined as a dog who is a bit more worked up than is normal for that dog before owners leave or upon return.</p> <p>These dogs may also vocalize for long periods of time when alone, but they don't show self injury, exit point destruction, or elimination (generally).</p> <p>Every case is different. So, when in doubt, be conservative and go slow (assume your dog's reaction will be worse than it might be). Mild cases can often be treated with adjunct measures (next column).</p>	<p><b>Your tasks: Use adjunct measures</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Blurring:</b> TV or radio is left on IF they are generally on when the humans are at home with the dog.</li><li>• <b>Low key departures and returns:</b> Long, soulful goodbyes and grand joyful reunions can increase the "my person is noticeably here with me" contrast from "my person is NOT here" that can make being alone feel bigger for your dog. So, keep your goodbyes and hellos mellow and blasé.</li><li>• <b>Increase exercise before you leave:</b> This could be an off-leash play session, brisk walk, play with other dogs, or whatever you have time for. Your dog should be tired before you leave (but not left in an energized state—so leave time for your dog to transition to being calmer before you walk out the door).</li><li>• <b>Midday relief:</b> A dog walker or play pal to visit midday can help dogs get through an otherwise very long day home alone.</li><li>• <b>Enrichment:</b> Dogs who have lots of mental stimulation are more relaxed. Here is a link to a wonderful FB page with tons of cheap, easy ideas to help your dog relax: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/canineenrichment/">https://www.facebook.com/groups/canineenrichment/</a></li></ul> <p><b>These can be helpful for dogs with no separation anxiety!</b></p>

# Week 2: Levels of Separation Anxiety and Next (Baby) Steps (Cont.)

## Your dog showed **MODERATE** separation anxiety

This can be loosely defined as a dog who is clearly struggling, but not in full-on panic mode as seen in a dog with severe separation anxiety.

These dogs may: eliminate inside, vocalize for long periods of time, and/or attempt break out of a space—but don't get to the point of self injury. These dogs generally require a systematic approach to helping them learn to be comfortable on their own.

### Your tasks: **SLOWLY** add more time and **USE** adjunct measures

- Expose your dog to VERY short absences (just a few seconds).
- Then, as your dog remains comfortable before you leave and when you return, make the absence slightly longer and longer. Think in terms of adding 10 minutes at a time. *Let us know if you'd like us to provide a guide to the increments you should use!*
- Employ the adjunct measures on the previous page.


## Your dog was **SERIOUSLY** **DISTRESSED**



You can tell your dog is panicked. S/he is may be drooling, howling, panting heavily upon your return. You find exit point destruction or self injury.

### Your task: Time to call in an expert

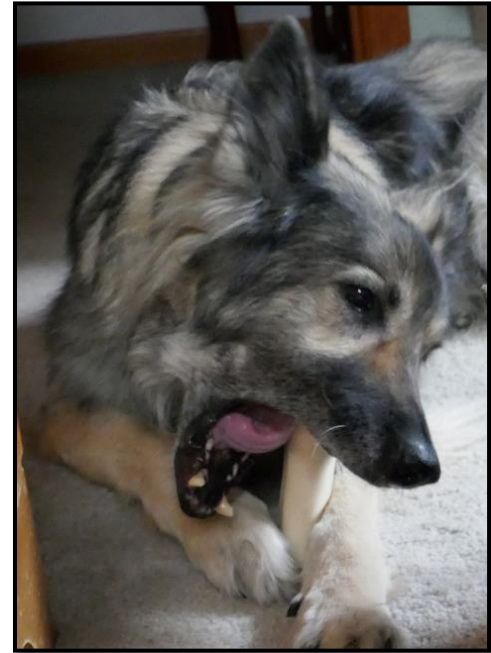
- While some dog trainers have experience with separation anxiety, dealing with severe separation anxiety is a specialty. Here is a link to the best resource out there for helping a dog with severe separation anxiety : <https://malenademartini.com/>. These specially trained and certified practitioners work with owners remotely.
- If that is not an option for you, here is a link to a good source of books and DVDs about separation anxiety: Nicole Wilde book and DVDs: <http://www.nicolewilde.com/store/separation-anxiety/>

 **Next week** Tools to help your dog feel better about being alone.

# Week 3: Tools

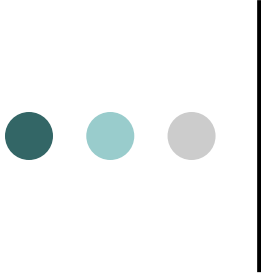
While there are many tools that can help dogs feel better when alone, here are a few of the most common ones. Always work with your veterinarian before administering any medications, herbs, etc.

- **CBD products:** There is a fair amount of anecdotal information that CBD products can help dogs with general anxiety. However, the strength, purity, and sourcing of CBD products varies widely. There has not yet been a study including a large number of dogs with separation anxiety using CBD products.
- **DAP (dog appeasing pheromone):** <https://www.adaptil.com/us/>. These can be worn as a collar and/or used via a diffuser inside your home. There is some good science behind the pheromone used in this product.
- **Adding another dog:** For SOME dogs, this can help. Generally, the dogs will have to be bonded in order for the presence of another to help the dog who already has separation anxiety. You will need to make sure the dogs get along and test them out for short unsupervised sessions to make sure they are safe alone and that the separation anxiety dog is actually getting significant relief from the presence of the other dog.
- **Technology:** Some owners have had success using a camera with the ability for their dog to hear their voice while they are not home. They are also helpful tools to determine how long a dog can be home alone comfortably. Many of these can stream live video feed to a smartphone. Some even dispense treats!



*I'll be working on this bone while you're out working!*





# Week 3: Tools

Tools continued...

- **Occupiers:** These can be stuffed Kongs, bully sticks, marrow bones or other long lasting chewables. While “power chewers” could get into trouble with chewable when left alone, there are fairly indestructible choices for these dogs. Bullymake.com has some good options. Make sure you’ve tested items while you’re home, and carefully check items upon return—we don’t want our dogs choking on anything or ingesting harmful pieces!
- **Anti-anxiety medication like Prozac (fluoxetine) or Trazodone:** These may be helpful for dogs with moderate or severe separation anxiety. It’s important to work with your veterinarian to decide whether drug therapy is a good (and safe!) choice for your dog.



NEVER use tools that hurt or scare a dog! Shock collars (including those that are activated when a dog barks/howls/vocalizes) are very likely to make your dog worse. He may not bark as much, but s/he is still suffering—and all of the fears s/he has about being alone are present. As his/her guardian, s/he is relying on you to for humane help.



# Week 3: Tools (Cont.)

If you have followed the steps we suggest, given it your best shot, and are still having a tough time trying to figure out next steps, give us a shout (our email addresses are on the first page).

Another great resource is the Facebook page “Canine Enrichment.” It has tons of fun, easy, cheap ideas for keeping dogs busy. You can use them to help relax your dog pre-departure or as tools to keep them busy while you are gone.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/canineenrichment/>

## Tasks for this week



- If needed, research some tools that may work for your dog
- Get/make some supplies for when your dog will be alone—like an occupier, or an enrichment idea!



**Next week** To crate or not to crate?

# Week 4: To Crate or Not to Crate?

Crates can keep separation anxiety dogs from destroying doors, windows, carpets, and other exit points. However, for some separation anxiety dogs, being in their crate is the number one predictor that they are about to be alone for longer than they can manage. It can be very difficult to get some dogs into crates for this reason.

Some dogs with moderate or severe separation anxiety have a more difficult time while inside a crate—while others do better in a crate (if they've already been comfortable with it).

For many of these dogs, an exercise pen or confinement in one room with a view outside makes can make them feel less trapped and alone. Not everyone has the option of a room that will serve as their dog's daytime space because they generally need to be proofed so that their dog doesn't eat inappropriate items. But, if you have this option, it's a good one to try for dogs with mild or moderate separation anxiety.



*Where will your dog's safe, happy space be?*

# Week 4: To Crate or Not to Crate

Dogs who have already developed separation anxiety often do very poorly in crates despite a good crate training protocol. It's simply a marker for them that they are about to become quite anxious.

So, you may need to re-test your dog to see if s/he is more relaxed outside of a crate. If you leave a TV or radio on (if you usually have one on while you ARE home so that it's something that happens when you are there) and you give your dog some exercise and an occupier to prepare him/her for being alone, you may see a big (positive) difference. Your dog may be more comfortable in the crate.

The bottom line is that every separation anxiety dog is different. You will need to play around with the variables outlined over the past two weeks to see what helps your dog be comfortable alone.

Moving forward...You may see some bit of progress and then your dog regresses. If that happens, consider adding in another relaxation tool and/or making along time shorter, rebuilding back to longer periods of time.



*Gratuitous adorable puppy photo*