

Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety can be a problem for any breed of dog. It is not specific to greyhounds. Symptoms of separation anxiety include drooling, destructive behaviors (such as chewing inappropriate items or tearing the fabric of dog beds or pillows), an otherwise housebroken dog eliminating in the house or kennel, barking, whining, howling, and nervousness. One or more of these behaviors does not necessarily mean your dog has separation anxiety. Look at the overall pattern of behavior before concluding that it is separation anxiety.

It is completely normal for an owner to be very frustrated by these behaviors. Keep in mind that separation anxiety may be temporary and pass without the need to consult behavioral specialists or administer medication.

In some cases, the solution may be fairly simple. For example, one dog would whine and pant continuously when she was in a plastic crate. Her owner tried a wire crate, and she became a totally different dog. It turned out that she just didn't like the plastic crate.

Since the dog's anxiety is due to the owner's absence, a gradually increasing time of separation may help a new pet acclimate to the time of separation, thereby allowing the pet to become accustomed to that absence. Here are some ideas that may be of assistance.

1. Go through all the motions of getting ready to leave the house, but do not actually leave. When the excitement is triggered by a specific event, such as the jiggling of car keys or putting on shoes, the specific anxiety-eliciting behavior can be performed to accustom the dog to it, and therefore desensitize the pet to the actual departure.
2. Add components to your routine to distract the dog. A favorite food or toy can be presented, with the owner leaving briefly as soon as the dog's attention is focused on the item.
3. Changes in the length of time you are absent can be helpful. For example, walk out and immediately come back in, then walk out and return after 30 seconds. Gradually increase the time and make it more random.
4. Do not punish the dog for the inappropriate behavior. Ideally, while the dog is being retrained, the owner should be gone just under the maximum length of time the dog can tolerate.
5. Do not reward negative behavior by returning while the dog is showing that behavior. For example, if the owner walks in when the dog is barking, the dog infers that barking will eventually bring the owner. Use a noise as a distraction if necessary, so the door is opened only when the dog is not showing the behavior. Don't make a big deal out of either leaving or returning, as this only amplifies the importance of your presence.

Leave without a big fanfare of good-byes and, upon your return, wait until the dog has calmed down before greeting the dog.

6. Get rid of the connection in the greyhound's mind that he or she only has to be in the "dreaded" crate when the owner is not home. Do this by randomly crating the dog for short periods while you are at home—maybe 10 minutes here and half an hour there. The idea behind this is to get the greyhound thinking, "Sometimes when I have to go in my crate the people leave, but sometimes I go in my crate and they stay home; I can never really predict what they will do." When putting the greyhound in the crate and taking him out, make it no big deal; keep it very low-key. Wait two or three minutes after getting home to let the greyhound out.

7. Give the greyhound something to do while in the crate. A Kong filled with peanut butter is always a treat. You can also put in some pieces of kibble or other small treats that the dog will be motivated to find.

8. Feed the greyhound in the crate to help the dog see it as a good place. Give the greyhound a treat every time he or she enters the crate to make it a positive experience.

9. In cases where the greyhound is chewing destructively, put a muzzle on the dog in and out of the crate. It will save the wear and tear on material items and eliminate one source of frustration.

10. If the greyhound eliminates in the crate, ensuring that the dog has an empty bowel and bladder is important. Be sure to give the dog at least two opportunities to void itself before you leave. You can also feed the greyhound a smaller breakfast and a larger dinner.

Management of separation anxiety can be difficult because it takes both time and effort to resolve the issues. The more severe the problem is, the more difficult the solution is. Some dogs require continuous work, but it is usually well worth the effort.

It is always a good idea to consult a veterinarian when a greyhound is struggling with separation anxiety. After trying a number of strategies, a veterinarian may suggest medication to lower the pet's anxiety level. After a period of weeks or months feeling less anxious about the owner leaving, the greyhound often can be weaned off of the medication without the return of the anxiety-related behaviors.

One last thought: It can be difficult to see the greyhound's progress on a daily basis. It is very important to look back every few weeks or each month and review where you came from in order to see the progress that has been made.