



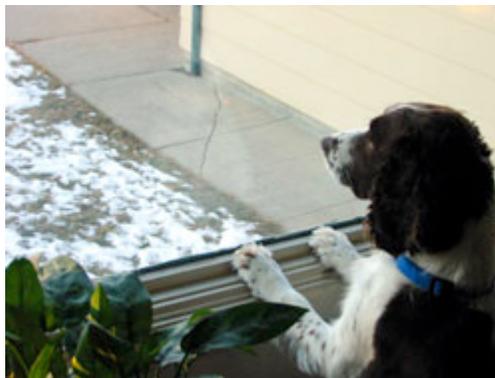
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## Managing Your Dog's Separation Anxiety

By Aidan Bindoff

### Missing you

Dogs are pack animals. With human owners as the "pack," domesticated dogs naturally prefer the companionship of their humans. It's one thing to have your dog follow you around the house amiably, however; it's quite another to learn that your dog howls relentlessly when you're at work or defecates in the house to show his displeasure at your absence. When your dog's behavior [0] in your absence seems extreme, he might be experiencing separation anxiety.



Canine separation anxiety is a set of behaviors that occurs in some dogs when their owners or "family" are not present. These behaviors include "destruction, vocalization, elimination of urine and/or stool, anorexia, drooling, attempts at escape, and/or behavioral depression," according to Debra F. Horwitz, DVM, as stated in her article "Separation Anxiety in Dogs [1]" (Atlantic Coast Veterinary Conference, 2001).

### Symptoms and treatment

It is important to realize that the symptoms listed above are not always indicative of canine separation anxiety. They can be indications of boredom, lack of exercise, or poor or incomplete house-training. Medical conditions can cause many of these symptoms as well. If your dog exhibits any of these symptoms in your absence, it is important to talk to a veterinary behaviorist for an accurate diagnosis and a treatment plan. In this author's opinion, separation anxiety may be the second most over-diagnosed canine behavior problem after dominance. However, it is important to address any and all individual problem behaviors. A competent veterinary behaviorist should be able to offer effective behavior modification techniques for any of the symptoms, whether or not they result from canine separation anxiety.

### **When your dog's behavior in your absence seems extreme, he might be experiencing separation anxiety.**

Once an accurate diagnosis has been made, treatment is usually a combination of medication and behavior modification, depending on the severity of the condition. Medication can play an important role in the treatment of genuine canine separation anxiety. It can provide



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a window of opportunity to undertake behavior modification techniques in real-life settings, something that can be difficult to implement without pharmacological assistance. Sometimes real life raises criteria [1] too fast for effective behavior modification; medication can provide a necessary advantage and relieve a beloved pet of discomfort and anxiety.

Internet searches provide a vast amount of information about the treatment of canine separation anxiety. Keep in mind that a veterinary behaviorist is the best source for treatment protocols. This article's single useful exercise seeks only to give an understanding of the behavioral principles at play in canine separation anxiety.

## **The Calming Yo-Yo exercise**

The Calming Yo-Yo exercise is designed to teach a dog how to remain calm during short, controlled absences from its owner. This exercise is useful for dogs who suffer from very mild to severe cases of separation anxiety, or for dogs who just don't like their owners to leave the room. A professional diagnosis of canine separation anxiety is not necessary to begin this exercise, but if your dog has a strong reaction to this exercise, it would be wise to consult a competent veterinary behaviorist soon.

### **The Calming Yo-Yo exercise is designed to teach a dog how to remain calm during short, controlled absences from its owner.**

The principles of the Calming Yo-Yo exercise are the same as for most realistic, sensible treatment protocols, which makes it easier to understand how those protocols work. The insights gained from this simple exercise make it less likely that serious errors will be made if or when more complex behavior modification procedures are attempted.

What the exercise does is demonstrate to the dog that being calm is the quickest, most reliable way to bring an owner back. Being anxious, whining, barking, stamping paws, panting excessively, or straining at the restraint won't achieve the dog's goal.

Like any good behavior modification program, this exercise starts off simply and works up, ensuring success all the way. It is important to make it easy for the dog to succeed at every step. Without success, there is nothing to reinforce; without reinforcement [1] there is less of the desired behavior.

## **Getting ready**

To start, find some way to restrain the dog so that he can't follow you. This can be a tether, a crate, a baby gate, or even a helper. It doesn't hurt to repeat the exercise with each of these restraints if they are available. Mix it up whenever possible, as it will be more practical to use one device over another in various situations. To simplify the explanation of the exercise, however, we'll assume that a tether is being used.

Make sure that your dog is in a harness or a wide, flat buckle collar fixed to a hook, post, or door handle-leaving just enough length of leash for your dog to sit, lie down, or turn around. As for you, start by standing immediately in front of your dog. Be quiet and calm. Don't give any cues—saying "Wait there, I'll be back in a minute" or "Stay," for example—as we want the ready behavior to be a default and not something that needs to be cued.



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If your dog is excited, wait for him to calm down before beginning. Allow plenty of time to complete this exercise; you can't bail out partway through if your dog is displaying anxious behaviors.

### **Raising criteria with the 300 Peck Method**

- Take one step away from your dog. If he is calm, click your clicker [1] and return to your dog.
- Take two steps away from your dog. If he is calm, click and return.
- Take three steps away from your dog. If he is calm, click and return. If he is not calm, wait quietly until he calms down, then click and return. Then start again, taking just one step away from your dog.

The method used here to raise criteria is known as the "300 Peck [1]" method. The 300 Peck Method directs you to raise criteria by one step each trial until failure, and then reset the criteria to one and start again. This method is an easy way to raise criteria while achieving a very high rate of success.

### **The 300 Peck Method is an easy way to raise criteria while achieving a very high rate of success.**

With these small successes, you'll soon run out of room and will have to go through a doorway and out of sight. In keeping with a "set your dog up for success" policy, don't leave the room just yet. Take the dog to another room and repeat the procedure—from the start—in that room. Do this in several rooms in the house and then perform the exercise outdoors.

Moving out of sight is a big leap and would raise the criteria too fast if plenty of trials in different locations were not attempted first. In many outdoor locations you can take dozens of steps away from your dog before you move out of sight. When you can take 20-25 steps away from your dog while he remains calm, go back to the first room and try an "out-of-sight" trial where you move into another room.

When it's time for out-of-sight trials, start counting *seconds* out of sight instead of steps away. The exercise now uses a *duration* criteria rather than a *distance* criteria. Ultimately, the aim is to be able to stay away from your dog for long periods of time without your dog displaying any anxiety. This exercise is the first step toward that goal, taken under controlled and achievable circumstances.

Note that a baby monitor can be helpful in the advanced stages of the Calming Yo-Yo exercise, so that when you are out of normal hearing range you can still hear your dog.

### **What if my dog fails?**

If your dog does not remain calm at any of the steps outlined above, all you can do is wait for calm, then click and return. Reset your criteria to one step away and try again.

Anxious behavior is just behavior. It looks and sounds terrible, but it can't go on forever. If your dog (or anyone nearby) is not coming to any physical harm, then wait it out. If you really can't wait it out, at least wait for a *reduction* in the anxious behavior before you return to your dog. If the anxious behavior is extreme, seek professional help sooner rather than later!



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## Where are the treats?

In the Calming Yo-Yo, exercise you are not asked to give your dog a treat, or play a game, or offer any of the usual rewards used in [clicker training](#) [1]. If your dog has canine separation anxiety, all he wants is for you to be near him. Any other reward is unnecessary and can even fail to communicate the intention of the exercise.

## If your dog has canine separation anxiety, all he wants is for you to be near him.

For a dog suffering separation anxiety, your return is an effective [reinforcer](#) [1]. You will get confirmation of the reinforcer with the effectiveness of the exercise. Ideally, calm behavior will increase and you will be able to move further away, or remain out of sight for longer. If this progression does not occur, discontinue the exercise until you have sought professional help.

The Calming Yo-Yo exercise attempts to increase the threshold of how far away you can go from your dog or how long you can stay away from him before he becomes anxious for your return. Show him that you always come back if he remains calm. Tossing a treat confuses the issue—and the dog. If you toss a treat, you are not showing your dog that you always come back when he is calm, but instead you show that he earns a treat. This may or may not be a good reinforcer for a dog suffering from separation anxiety.

## Watch and wait

Do we know if the Calming Yo-Yo exercise produces changes in internal emotional states? No, we can only observe the dog and the results. When you think about it, it's observed behavior that leads us to believe that a dog suffers from separation anxiety in the first place. Otherwise, we wouldn't have any cause for concern!

The Calming Yo-Yo is a basic and fundamental exercise for the treatment of separation anxiety. Keep in mind that in any separation anxiety case there can be aspects of the problem that require treatment and guidance from a competent and qualified professional in order to achieve the best outcome.

About the author Aidan Bindoff is the editor of [Positive Petzine](#) [2], a free online resource for dog owners and trainers. He lives and works in Tasmania, Australia.

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### Links:

[1] <http://www.vin.com/VINDBPub/SearchPB/Proceedings/PR05000/PR00314.htm>

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