

TIER 2: PROTOCOL FOR DESENSITIZATION AND COUNTER-CONDITIONING USING GRADUAL DEPARTURES

Dogs with separation anxiety often begin to experience distress at the first indication that you will be leaving the dog's sight. The first set of protocols concentrated on reinforcing general relaxation and responsiveness to your vocal cues (see **Protocol for Deference**, **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1** and **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**). For some dogs who are overly concerned about departure patterns, you may have practiced uncoupling cues for departure from the actual event. Remember that done too quickly or inappropriately, the latter may make dogs more anxious. This Tier 2 program concentrates on desensitizing and counter-conditioning the dog to actually being left alone for gradually longer periods, by teaching the dog that he can be calmer and will feel better when he does not become distressed. Ultimately, we want your dog to learn that he has some control over how he feels, and that distress need not be the only choice.

It is not sufficient that your dog does not bark or destroy something when left alone. The goal of this program is to reinforce relaxation and behaviors associated with actually feeling calm when left alone (i.e., happy looks, lowered heart rates, and slowed respiration). Once again, go slowly. It is particularly important that dogs with separation anxiety do not become stressed or made more anxious during this protocol. Speed is not a measure of success—behavior is. Remember to shape the dog's behavior by rewarding even the smallest, incremental hint that the dog is more relaxed than previously.

If at any time you notice outward physical and physiological signs that your dog is becoming anxious while working—panting, pacing, salivating, licking of the lips, scanning the environment, an unwillingness to sit still—break the suite of tasks on which you were working into smaller components. And give the dog a break from working. Research now shows that dogs consolidate and use more of what they have learned if they have some time off. So if you are having trouble working well with your dog one day, consider it a holiday and start again the following day. If, however, you continue to have difficulty, consider returning to your vet or veterinary behaviorist for additional help and suggestions.

Remember that outward physical and physiological signs of stress or anxiety are very variable and can also include an increased heart rate, lowered head with ears retracted, lips pulled back horizontally, dilated pupils, “redder” eyes with or without movement, shaking or shivering, whimpering or whining, and blowing in and out of “cheeks.” If you see any of these signs, your dog is too distressed to effectively learn to change its behavior. Backtrack and return to a level at which your dog does not react inappropriately and can respond happily. Break the tasks with which he had difficulty into smaller components. All of the following tasks can be broken into smaller components. If you have trouble getting the dog through even smaller task lists, make sure you are continuing to reinforce the deep breathing. If doing this still does not help, you may be trying to move through all of this too quickly and might benefit from additional help from your vet, trainer, or veterinary behaviorist.

Everyone in the family who is involved with your dog must be able to successfully complete the program, so that

the dog does learn to worry only about one person's absences, and so he can learn to generalize a relaxed response to being left.

When the program is completed in one physical location where your dog was able to remain, you are ready to start working with the dog in other locations: other rooms, indoors or outside, inside or outside a fence, et cetera.

Remember to use your dog's behavior to help you decide how to adapt the protocol for your dog's specific needs. If your dog is perfectly calm when left in a car but is distressed when someone leaves, start by practicing the tasks in the car. If the dog is calm when all but one person leaves the house but panics when that person leaves, start by practicing with departures involving people for whom your dog does not panic, working up to the person about whom the dog most worries. If your dog appears to keep a good calendar and does not become distressed when people leave on weekends, start by practicing the tasks in the protocol repeatedly on weekends.

Remember to shape your dog's behavior by rewarding even the smallest signal that it is more relaxed with each succeeding task. Be patient. Do not become angry. Do not punish the dog. Stop and return later if you are feeling stressed.

Note: As usual, for the following tasks always remember to physically return to the dog and stand in front of him so that you can give the reward after completing the task without accidentally encouraging the dog to get up and possibly become reactive.

Day 1: Dog's Task

- Sit quietly and calmly for 5 seconds
- Sit quietly and calmly for 10 seconds
- Sit quietly and calmly for 20 seconds
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take one step back
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take two steps back
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take one step to the side
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take two steps to the side
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take three steps back
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take three steps to the side
- Sit quietly and calmly while you walk around the dog
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take 10 steps backward and return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you go through the door or the entranceway and return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you open the door or go into the entrance for 10 seconds and return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take one step to the side
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take two steps to the side
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take three steps back
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take three steps to the side
- Sit quietly and calmly while you walk around the dog

Day 2: Dog's Task

- Sit quietly and calmly for 20 seconds
- Sit quietly and calmly while you take 10 steps backward and return

- Sit quietly and calmly while you go through the door or the entranceway and return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you open the door or go into the entrance for 10 seconds and return
- Sit quietly and calmly for 30 seconds
- Sit quietly and calmly while you disappear from view for 5 seconds and return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you go through the door or the entranceway and return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you touch a doorknob
- Sit quietly and calmly while you rattle a doorknob
- Sit quietly and calmly while you turn the doorknob, but do not open the door
- Sit quietly and calmly while you touch a doorknob
- Sit quietly and calmly while you rattle a doorknob
- Sit quietly and calmly while you turn the doorknob, but do not open the door
- Sit quietly and calmly while you open the door a few centimeters and quickly close it
- Sit quietly and calmly while you open the door 0.25 meters (10 inches) and then close it
- Sit quietly and calmly while you open the door 0.5 meters (20 inches) and then close it
- Sit quietly and calmly while you walk back 10 steps
- Sit quietly and calmly while you rattle the doorknob
- Sit quietly and calmly while you open the door 0.5 meter (20 inches) and then close it
- Sit quietly and calmly while you open the door 1 meter (3.3 feet) and then close it
- Sit quietly and calmly while you step into the door but remain in view

Day 3: Dog's Task

- Sit quietly and calmly while you turn the doorknob, but do not open the door
- Sit quietly and calmly while you open the door a few centimeters and quickly close it
- Sit quietly and calmly while you open the door 0.5 meter (20 inches) and then close it
- Sit quietly and calmly while you open the door 1 meter (3.3 feet) and then close it
- Sit quietly and calmly while you step into the door but remain in view
- Sit quietly and calmly while you step into the doorway
- Sit quietly and calmly while you step through the doorway
- Sit quietly and calmly while you step through the doorway, close the door just slightly, and immediately return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you step through the doorway, close the door, wait 5 seconds, and return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you disappear from view for 10 seconds and return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you disappear from view for 15 seconds and return
- Sit quietly and calmly for 10 seconds
- Sit quietly and calmly for 15 seconds
- Sit quietly and calmly while you disappear from view for 15 seconds and return

- Sit quietly and calmly while you step through the doorway, close the door, wait 10 seconds, and return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you step through the doorway, close the door, wait 20 seconds, and return
- Sit quietly and calmly while you go out of the door and firmly close it
- Sit quietly and calmly for 20 seconds
- Sit quietly and calmly for 10 seconds
- Sit for 5 seconds

Day 4: Dog's Task

- Sit quietly and calmly for 10 seconds
- Sit quietly and calmly while you go out of the door and close it:
 - And wait 5 seconds
 - And wait 30 seconds
 - And wait 45 seconds
 - And wait 90 seconds
 - And wait 2 minutes
- Sit quietly and calmly while you go out of the door and close it:
 - And wait 3 minutes
 - And wait 4 minutes
 - And wait 5 minutes
 - And wait 7 minutes
 - And wait 10 minutes

Continue as above until your dog can sit quietly and relaxed while left alone for 30 minutes. If you video your dog when you are gone, you will have an objective assessment of whether the dog is improving. You can also monitor your dog from work using a webcam. All of these tools will make you more effective at helping your dog.

Generally, if a dog can be relaxed while left alone for 30 minutes, he will be able to relax when left alone for normal durations, prohibiting any startling or disastrous consequences. "Startling or disastrous consequences" can include storms for some dogs. *If your dog is afraid of storms and one occurs while your dog is left alone, relapse is possible.* Treat all of your dog's problems. Remember that anxious dogs have comorbid conditions, meaning that, unless your dog's condition was diagnosed early in its development, he may have multiple conditions and all of them need to be treated.

If you let your dog's behavior be your guide, you will seldom go wrong!

For Future Repetitions

- Repeat all tasks in different locations.
- Repeat all tasks with all family members.
- Repeat all tasks with only every second or third task being rewarded with a treat. (Remember praise!)
- Repeat with only intermittent treat reinforcement. (Remember praise!)

Anti-anxiety medications may help some dogs who are otherwise unable to succeed in this program. Remember, if it is decided that medication could benefit your dog, you need to use *it in addition to the behavior modification, not instead of it.*