



FREE GUIDE

The separation anxiety starter guide

A calm, step-by-step plan from Frolicy

Introduction

If your dog barks, paces, or destroys things the moment you leave, you're not dealing with a "bad dog" — you're dealing with a dog who genuinely believes something scary happens when you disappear. The good news: separation anxiety responds well to a slow, structured plan. This guide walks through why it happens and a five-day plan you can start today.

Why separation anxiety happens

Dogs are social animals, and for many, being left alone doesn't just feel boring — it feels unsafe. This can show up in a dog who's always been fine alone, especially after a change in routine, a move, a new schedule, or a stretch of time where you were suddenly home a lot more than usual. The behaviors you're seeing — barking, drooling, destruction near doors and windows, accidents despite being house-trained — are stress responses, not defiance. Punishing them after the fact doesn't help, because the dog isn't connecting the punishment to the behavior; they're just getting more anxious about you coming home too.

The five-day desensitizing plan

The goal is to teach your dog that you leaving is not a big deal, by making your absences so short at first that they never reach the panic threshold. Go slower than feels necessary — this is the single biggest reason the method fails when people try it on their own.

- Day 1: Practice your leaving routine (keys, shoes, coat) without actually leaving, several times, until it stops causing a reaction.
- Day 2: Step outside and close the door for 5 to 10 seconds. Come back in before any distress starts. Repeat 5 to 8 times.
- Day 3: Extend to 1 to 2 minutes outside, still returning calmly before whining or barking begins.
- Day 4: Build up to 10 to 15 minutes, checking in on how your dog is doing through a camera or a quiet listen at the door.
- Day 5: Attempt a normal short errand (20 to 30 minutes), and treat any signs of regression as a cue to shorten your next few sessions again.

Signs you're ready to progress

You're ready to extend the time when your dog settles within a minute or two of you leaving — lying down, going quiet, or losing interest in the door. If the anxious behavior is still happening at your current duration, stay there longer rather than pushing forward on a schedule. This isn't a race; dogs who are rushed through desensitizing plans often regress further than where they started.

When to get extra help

If your dog is injuring themselves trying to escape, showing signs of panic within seconds of you leaving, or not improving after two to three weeks of consistent practice, it's time to loop in a certified trainer or a veterinary behaviorist. Severe separation anxiety sometimes needs a combination of behavioral work and, in some cases, medication prescribed by a vet — and there's no shame in that being part of the plan.

Before-you-leave checklist

- ☐ Give your dog a chance to burn energy (a walk or play session) before you go
- ☐ Leave 15 to 20 minutes before your actual exit to let excitement settle
- ☐ Set up a safe, comfortable space with water and a familiar-smelling item
- ☐ Leave a long-lasting food puzzle or chew as a positive association
- ☐ Keep departures and arrivals low-key — no dramatic goodbyes or hellos
- ☐ Track which durations feel calm versus stressful so you know where to start next time

Summary

Separation anxiety is common, treatable, and not a reflection of bad training or a "broken" dog. Small, boring, repeated absences — shorter than feels necessary — are what actually rewire the association. Progress is rarely a straight line, and that's normal too.

This guide is for general education only and is not a substitute for advice from a certified trainer, veterinarian, or veterinary behaviorist. If you're seeing signs of distress, aggression, or a sudden change in behavior, please consult a professional who can assess your pet directly.