

# Separation, Confinement, or Noises: What Is Scaring That Dog?

Kelly C. Ballantyne, DVM\*

## KEYWORDS

- Canine • Separation anxiety • Noise aversion • Noise phobia
- Behavior modification

## KEY POINTS

- Separation anxiety and noise aversions are significant welfare issues that affect many companion dogs.
- Video is key in the diagnosis of separation anxiety and in differentiating it from confinement distress and noise aversions.
- Treatment of these conditions using a combination of psychopharmaceuticals and behavior modification is recommended to improve welfare as quickly as possible.

## INTRODUCTION

Separation anxiety and noise aversions are 2 of the most common behavioral disorders of dogs with approximately 17% to 29% reported to have separation anxiety<sup>1-3</sup> and 23% to 49% reported to have noise aversion.<sup>1,4-6</sup> These conditions can be comorbid with each other and with other fear-related behavioral disorders.<sup>1,4,7-10</sup> Separation anxiety and noise aversions present significant welfare issues for affected dogs; they cause emotional distress, can interfere with normal functioning, may result in self-trauma, and increase the dog's risk of relinquishment or euthanasia. These conditions can also negatively impact the quality of life of the pet owner or owners.<sup>11</sup> Identification and prompt treatment are needed to reduce suffering.

## Terminology

The fear emotion is highly conserved across species and evolved to detect threats and initiate the behavioral and physiologic response needed to survive them. Animals learn which stimuli to fear through an unconscious process called fear conditioning. Fear conditioning is highly resistant to forgetting because it is critical to remember which environmental stimuli are safe and which are unsafe; however, fear conditioning can

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Veterinary Clinical Medicine, University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine, Urbana, IL, USA

\* 2242 West Harrison Street Suite 101, Chicago, IL 60612.

E-mail address: [kcmorgan@illinois.edu](mailto:kcmorgan@illinois.edu)

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lead to learning that innocuous or neutral stimuli are unsafe, resulting in chronic emotional distress.<sup>12</sup> Anxieties, fears, and phobias refer to emotional, behavioral, and physiologic responses to threatening stimuli. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they refer to different emotional states and may have different neurobiological mechanisms.<sup>13</sup>

- Anxiety is anticipation of a danger or threat. The stimulus for the response is not always identifiable or present.
- Fear is an emotional, behavioral, and physiologic response to a stimulus that the animal perceives is threatening.
- Phobia is a persistent and maladaptive fear that is out of proportion to the situation or stimulus.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Signs of Fear in Dogs***

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Signs of fear in dogs can be active or passive and include avoidance or hiding, flattened ears, lowered body posture, low tail position, pacing or excessive activity, visual scanning/hypervigilance, seeking out contact with humans and other animals, and aggression. Physiologic signs of fear in dogs include panting, salivation, urination and defecation, tense muscles, dilated pupils, and anorexia.<sup>15,16</sup> Dogs that have separation-related distress, confinement distress, or noise aversions will show similar clinical signs, and these conditions can be confused with each other.<sup>13,17</sup> Identifying the stimuli or conditions that elicit these signs is important in differentiating separation anxiety, confinement distress, and noise aversions from each other and for identifying comorbidity<sup>10,14</sup> (**Table 1**).

### ***Separation Anxiety***

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Separation-related behaviors are described with terms including separation anxiety, separation-related disorder, and separation-related distress. Although this is the most well studied behavioral disorder in dogs, there is no consensus on diagnostic terminology.<sup>13</sup> The term separation anxiety is used throughout this article to describe dogs that show signs of distress when separated from the person or persons to whom they are most attached or when left alone without a human companion. The diagnostic criteria for separation anxiety are that signs occur only when the dog is alone or cannot access its owner.<sup>2,20</sup> Separation anxiety signs may be shown in the absence or perceived absence of the owner or owners—some dogs will become distressed if the owner is in an area of the home that the dog cannot access.<sup>2,14</sup> The most common owner complaints of dogs with separation anxiety are house soiling, destruction, and excessive vocalization<sup>3,8,17,21–23</sup>; dogs that experience distress but whose signs do not leave evidence (ie, pacing, panting, whining) may go undiagnosed. Having another dog in the house does not prevent separation anxiety,<sup>10</sup> and video analysis shows that affected dogs that live with other dogs behave similarly to affected dogs that live alone.<sup>21</sup> Dogs may show signs of distress within 10 to 30 minutes of the owner's departure,<sup>21,24</sup> and signs of separation anxiety typically occur every time the dog is home alone regardless of the duration of the owner's absence.<sup>14,20</sup> Some owners may report signs occur only occasionally or when the dog is left alone outside of its normal routine,<sup>24</sup> but these inconsistent reactions to being left alone may reflect an intensification of the dog's distress following routine changes<sup>25</sup> rather than inconsistent distress, or may indicate the presence of a comorbid condition such as noise aversion.<sup>19</sup> For example, some dogs may pace, pant, and whine or remain vigilant whenever home alone but may bark repeatedly and destroy items when alone off-routine or during storms. Without

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