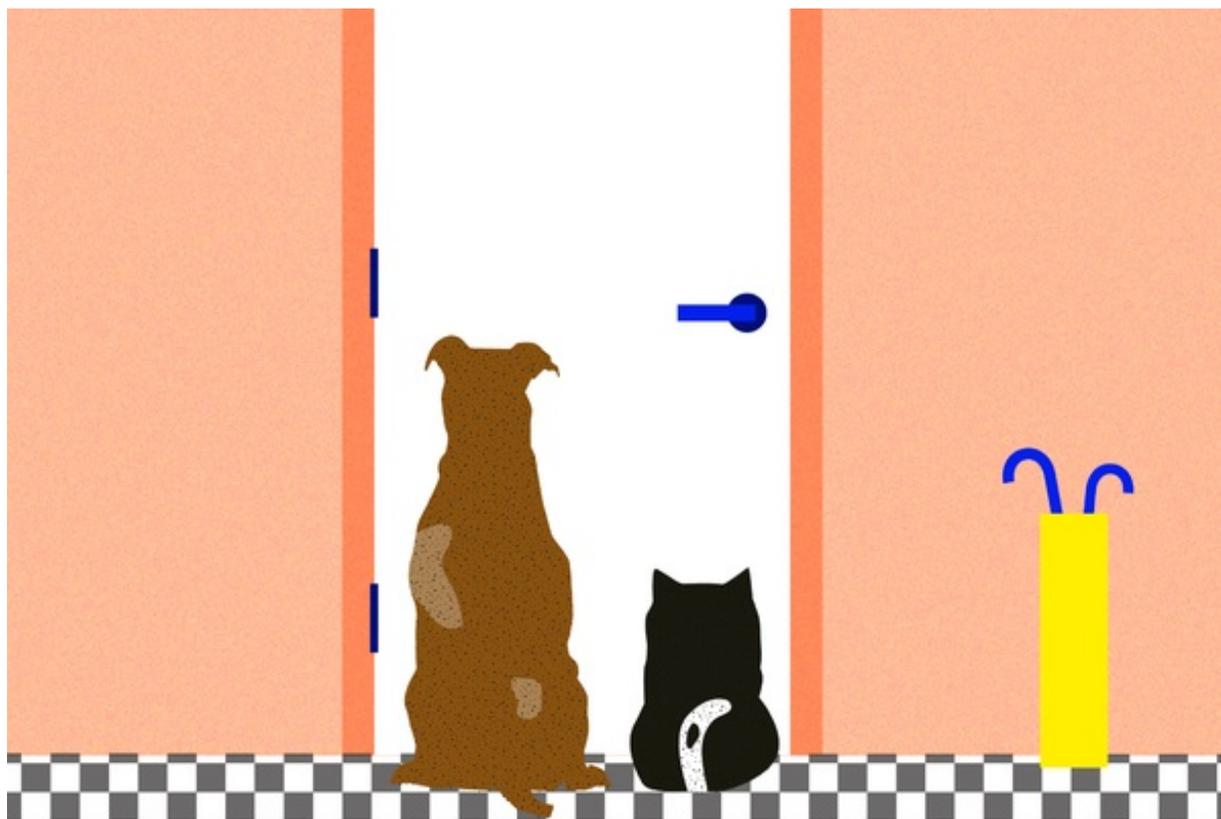


How to Help Your Pet With Post-Quarantine Separation Anxiety

[nytimes.com/2020/08/08/smarter-living/wirecutter/pets-quarantine-separation-anxiety.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/08/smarter-living/wirecutter/pets-quarantine-separation-anxiety.html)

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In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, many people began social distancing from relatives and investing additional time with pets. Animal shelters reported record numbers of pets going into foster homes, with placement rates from 50 percent to 70 percent, according to the ASPCA and the Best Friends Animal Society. Petfinder.com saw adoption inquiries nearly double from March to May compared with the previous three months. But when it eventually comes time for people to return to work, pets may be ill-equipped to handle the long days at home alone.

This transition period may create separation anxiety, which experts we spoke with say is as real for cats and dogs as it is for humans. Experts define separation anxiety as a pet's distress caused by the absence of the owner. Signs may include chewing on doors, excessive howling or pacing, inappropriate marking or scratching and obsessive grooming. It's estimated that mood disorders are diagnosed in 20 percent to 40 percent of dogs referred to animal behavior practices, according to a 2001 study in *The Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. And more than 13 percent of cats have exhibited symptoms of separation anxiety, according to a [2020 study](#) published in the open-access

journal PLOS One.

Owners of well-behaved pets may think their animals won't have any problems adjusting, but that may not necessarily be the case. "The problem isn't going to manifest itself when the owner is home," said Dr. Wailani Sung, a veterinary behaviorist at the [San Francisco SPCA](#). "They don't realize that their dogs are adapting to them being around, and when they leave for work it's going to be a shock to them."

To avoid returning home to a chewed-up throw pillow or a urine-soaked bedspread, pet owners should take steps now to help ease the transition.

Hiring a trainer for virtual sessions is a good start. We spoke with professionals to find out what else you can do to prepare your pet for your eventual return to work. Their tips all require consistency, patience and, of course, plenty of fun.

Take a walk — without your pet.

When a dog scratches at the door after you leave to run an errand or a cat mistakes that pile of dirty laundry for a litter box, experts say your pet is really telling you that it's worried you're leaving for good. Now is the time to train your pet to understand that you'll eventually be back. Start by taking a 15-minute walk without your pet — after its bathroom break, of course — and bring the entire family so that the animal is left alone. Connect a [pet camera](#) to observe your pet's behavior while you're away. If your pet responds well to your absence, increase the time away to 30 minutes the next day, and keep the trip frequency sporadic — perhaps two or three times per week. Since pets love routine, you should also adjust their feeding and walking times to reflect your schedule before you return to work.

If your pet continues to show other signs of distress, reduce the time of the walk until your pet appears relaxed, and then build your way back up more slowly. "We want to leave and come back before they get upset," Dr. Sung said. If you can work up to the four-hour mark, she added, most pets will be fine for an entire workday.

Break up the day with new visitors.

If quarantine restrictions have been lifted in your area, consider hiring a pet professional to give your pet someone to interact with while you're away. Even just weekly visits can break up the monotony and temporarily help mild symptoms of separation anxiety, Dr. Sung said. When you're searching for someone who has been trained to handle animals with separation anxiety, find a professional who is reliable and patient, said Hadley Raysor, the founder of [the Dandy Dogwalker](#) in Alameda, Calif. "A good pet sitter or dog walker will pay attention to your dog's behavior and body language, and will be available to communicate with the pet owner about escalating behavior," Mx. Raysor said.

Try toys or activities to keep your pet occupied.

Investing in quality [pet accessories](#) will ensure a peaceful transition when you're ready to spend time away from your pet. "You want things that allow them to interact with their environment in a positive way," said [Mikel Delgado](#), a certified applied animal behaviorist and a postdoctoral fellow at the [School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California, Davis](#). "While you're doing your work, your pet can do their own work, too."

For dogs, stuff the rubber [Kong Classic](#) with chopped-up [fruit](#), [peanut butter](#) or plain yogurt, freeze it, and then set it on your [dog's bed](#) as you head out the door. "It takes their mind off of your leaving, and by the time they're done it's time for a nap," Dr. Sung said. Wirecutter also likes sprinkling kibble or treats on the [Paw5 Woolly Snuffle Mat](#), which is great for dogs with a penchant for sniffing the ground for food crumbs.

For cats, a 15-minute session with a toy that mimics a bird's flight movements, such as [Petmate's Jackson Galaxy Air Prey Wand](#), can tire them out before you leave. Sprinkling [Yeowww Catnip](#) on a cat tree or a window perch entices them to exert their energy in a positive way (rather than scratching up the furniture). And a kibble-dispensing [puzzle toy](#), like the [PetSafe SlimCat Interactive Toy and Food Dispenser](#), will simultaneously keep them entertained and tire them out at mealtimes.

Use calming aids to help your pet relax.

Over-the-counter pheromones and calming aids help companion animals remain relaxed, especially when there has been a change in routine. Wirecutter and Dr. Sung both recommend [Adaptil products for dogs](#) and [Feliway products for cats](#). "It helps increase their confidence and decrease their anxiety," Dr. Sung said. Chewable calming treats are a little cheaper than pheromone sprays and diffusers. Look for calming supplements that contain [alpha-casozepine](#), [L-theanine](#) or [L-tryptophan](#), Dr. Sung added, because they're backed by research. If you can't afford commercial calming aids, place a used pillowcase or a T-shirt you've worn recently next to your pet's favorite napping spot; it has your scent on it and should soothe the animal.

Consult the pet professionals.

In more severe cases, you may find yourself at a loss about how to deal with your pet's behavior. Animals may act out by damaging baseboards, chewing on their crates, urinating inappropriately or excessively grooming themselves until they develop bald spots. "I've had dogs that jumped out of the window trying to follow their owner," Dr. Sung said. "I've actually had one break their leg."

It's important to address a pet's unwanted behavior before it spirals out of control, and experts say even the smallest signs of distress should be taken seriously. An accredited dog trainer or an animal behaviorist can help pet owners develop a training curriculum.

There's no state or federal certification needed to be a pet trainer in the United States, so Wirecutter recommends hiring credentialed professionals registered with the Animal Behavior Society, the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers or the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants for their use of evidence-based approaches. The Academy for Dog Trainers in Emeryville, Calif., founded by Jean Donaldson; the Karen Pryor Academy in Waltham, Mass.; and the Victoria Stilwell Academy in Atlanta, Ga. are also reputable options, said Anna Wong, a graduate of the Karen Pryor Academy and the owner of Mutts Have Fun, a dog-training business in the San Francisco Bay Area.

You may need to consult a vet behaviorist if a trainer isn't successful in helping your pet transition to spending time without you, as your animal may have a severe case of separation anxiety. If you meet with a professional in person, wear a mask during training sessions, and always wash your hands and wipe down your pet's belongings after every visit. Virtual sessions are also an option. The American College of Veterinary Behaviorists lists qualified experts, like Dr. Sung, in its directory. Vet behaviorists guide pet owners by reviewing an animal's medical history, behavior and environment to develop a training game plan, and they can determine whether medications, like those used to treat panic disorders in people, can aid the rehabilitation process.

"They're living in our world," Dr. Sung said, "and if you can be patient and provide clear instructions, your pet will thrive."

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