

# Separation Anxiety – Is There Hope?



**By Lorraine May, M.A.**

*Founder, Misha May Foundation*

**S**uccessful resolution of separation anxiety is common. In fact, every case I have been involved with has improved dramatically and most have healed completely. The process can be challenging, but also incredibly rewarding. These highly social, sensitive and loyal dogs often make the best companions, but because of events beyond their control, they seek constant reassurance. And when it is not forthcoming, they have a meltdown, not unlike a human panic attack.

Humans who suffer from panic attacks or extreme anxiety are often treated with both medication and psychotherapy. Medications can be prescribed for canines as well, but since they are unable to perform therapeutic self-talk such as “this will pass” or “I’m safe,” their humans must assist them with specific treatment protocols.

If you have lived with, or are currently residing with a dog with separation anxiety, my heart goes out to you. Only those who have spent 24/7 with such a dog can begin to imagine the hopelessness and frustration of feeling like a prisoner in your own life. And if you have helped your dog change her relationship to being alone, you have my deepest respect. Most dogs are emotionally and psychologically damaged when they are given up by their person, but for a dog with separation anxiety, a relinquishment often triggers a downward spiral accompanied by successive abandonments.

Fortunately, the deepest desires of a dog with separation anxiety are in harmony with the goals for treatment as well as the means for prevention. We want to teach her that not only is she safe when she is alone, but also that fabulous things can happen. We want her to come to trust that she will not be abandoned, and to

experience her world as enjoyable, predictable and nurturing. So, what sets separation anxiety apart?

The condition of separation anxiety shares symptoms with generalized anxiety often creating confusion. What’s different with separation anxiety is the immediate onset of symptoms following the departure of the dog’s person, destruction targeted at exits in the hope of pursuit, occurrence of self-injury and inability to self-soothe. Desperate dogs have cracked teeth and bloodied muzzles on their crates, crashed through glass windows and leaped from balconies.

Symptoms of separation anxiety can resemble those of puppies or bored dogs who are destructive. But for them, containment or stimulating interactive toys can solve these problems. Dogs who avoid crates, vocalize or have accidents may simply need crate training, confidence building or housetraining. These tactics are equally effective in creating manners and self-control in a dog with separation anxiety, but don’t address her panicked state. As she is propelled by her chemistry to yet higher states of anxiety and panic, she has neither the capacity to self-soothe nor to learn.

As I write this, an eight-month-old puppy who has finished playing outside, wants to come in now. She is vocal, potentially destructive to my door and demanding, but she doesn’t have separation anxiety. She will most likely redirect her attention if I ignore her or respond to my guidance to calm down.

## **Separation Anxiety Treatment Objectives**

To meet the goals for a dog with separation anxiety, I focus on a four-point behavioral approach, whose pace and scope

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*With treatment, Kabul acclimated to a crate through positive associations. Photo by Barbara Millman.*



*Slinky now leaves her mom to play in the yard! Photo by Barbara Millman*

are determined for each individual dog. Proceeding steadily and slowly builds a strong foundation and eventually allows the work to go more quickly. The keys to treatment are to prevent panic attacks, to render departure cues irrelevant, to change the emotional response to triggers and to facilitate independence. Unfortunately, these dogs cannot be crated because of their tendency to injure themselves. Usually, the companionship of another dog is not sufficiently reassuring in the initial stages, but can be comforting later.

### **Getting the help you need**

Preventing panic attacks offers the physical body a needed rest, an opportunity to release its reactive pattern and the motivation to try to trust again. Initially, this requires a 24/7 dog chaperone and is often the reason the treatment fails. For those who have jobs and lives, I can suggest a few strategies. If appropriate, arrange for time off from work and let your dog accompany you as much as possible. Enlist the help of friends, neighbors and family in conjunction with professionals such as a dog walker. If possible, create a group for people with dogs with separation anxiety for education and shared care. Enroll your dog in a residential separation anxiety program in the home of an experienced behaviorist. (See Resources for Separation Anxiety on page 33.)

Keys, coats and shoes signal our departure. Dogs with separation anxiety react to these cues as if danger is imminent. To render these cues irrelevant and thus prevent or assuage your dog's anxiety, do them out of order and at atypical times. Even though you aren't leaving the house today, wear your work coat. Take your keys with you into the backyard for a game of fetch, not errands in the car. Prepare your purse or briefcase, keeping it nearby as you do laundry.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if on a workday morning your dog became excited rather than distraught when she heard your keys? You can alter her emotional response by pairing the jingling of the keys with a very special tasty treat. You can do that with each of the triggers so that over time they begin to symbolize pleasant, not threatening, outcomes.

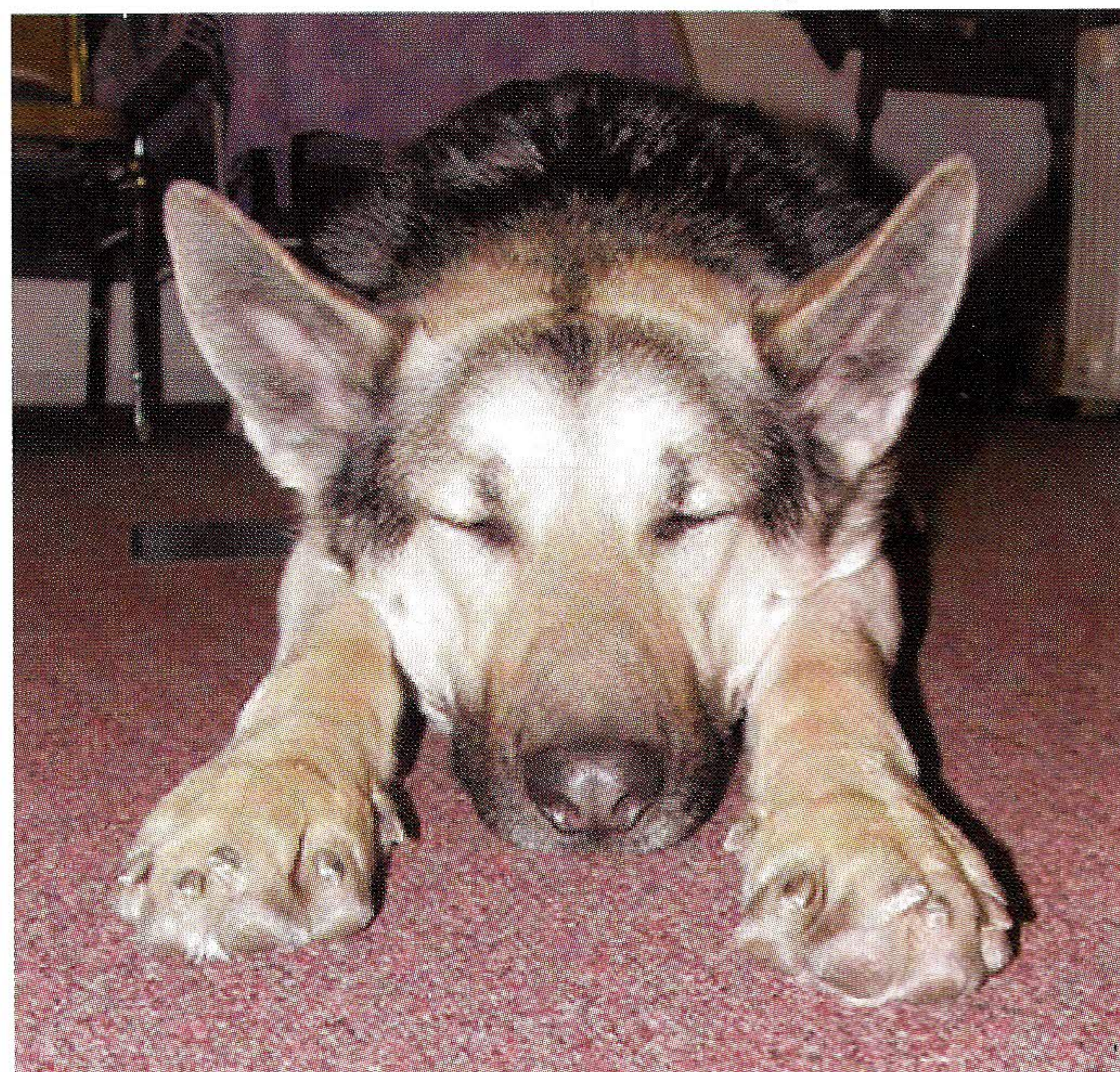
Each interaction with your dog sends a message. You can frequently reward and reinforce her independence. As your dog

becomes more relaxed and less intensely watchful, initiate a slow paced incremental system of separation. Very gradually, avert your eyes, turn your back or step away, letting your dog know that you are not only available to her, but also have confidence in her ability to be on her own. Toss her a treat from a distance; sit with her but don't engage; maintain calm arrivals and departures. You must proceed so slowly that your dog does not react, thus increasing her capacity for calm separation while affirming your trustworthiness. Dogs progress more rapidly when they realize that we 'get' them and what they need, instead of simply trying to make them do what we want.

Finally, conduct a reality assessment. Even when separation anxiety has resolved or improved as with clients Buddy, Kabul or Slinky, a dog may remain anxious. Buddy, at 100 pounds and returned to a shelter three times, doesn't destroy homes anymore, but he is unable to relax if he thinks he will be left at the vet or groomer. Kabul, rescued from Afghanistan, is still wild at heart. Slinky, still a pup, munches inappropriate items and monitors windows.

If you find you are having difficulty changing the behavior, don't despair. Call a professional to help you formulate and carry out a plan. The most effective approach can be a comprehensive individualized plan designed by a positive trainer or behaviorist who has actually lived with a dog with separation anxiety and helped to resolve this condition. Your peace of mind and your dog are worth it!

*Lorraine May founded the Misha May Foundation animal rescue in 2001 in memory of her dog Misha who had passed away from cancer. She is Executive Director and Head Trainer with extensive experience in dealing with extreme separation anxiety issues in dogs. For more information, please visit [www.mishamayfoundation.org](http://www.mishamayfoundation.org).*



*Following treatment for separation anxiety, Buddy now loves staying at home. Photo by Lorraine May*