

Surviving Severe Separation Anxiety

Severe SA can be devastating for owners who fail to build and maintain a support system.

BY SANDI THOMPSON, CPDT-KA

I get several calls a week from people whose dogs are suffering with varying degrees of separation anxiety. The dogs may exhibit mild isolation distress, where they are uncomfortable at being left alone; a severe form of anxiety, where they go into a full-blown panic when left alone; or anything in between.

Separation anxiety is a serious condition. Dogs suffering from the more severe forms may salivate, pace, bark, howl, and/or urinate and defecate in panic. They can destroy cars, homes, and possessions at an incredible rate, and dig and chew their way out of windows and doors. They sometimes resort to self-mutilation when left alone. Just think about how intensely frightened you'd have to be to lose the contents

of your bowels when left alone, or to rip out the walls of a room to escape. These dogs are suffering immensely and miserably. They need help from a patient and understanding owner – and the owner needs professional guidance from an experienced, educated trainer who understands the behavior and the necessary steps to overcome it. What I didn't realize until early this year was that, in order to help a dog triumph over

a severe manifestation of this condition, extraordinary support for his owner is absolutely crucial.

NEVER IMAGINED THIS

I learned this the hard way: first-hand. Though I had no intention of doing so, I adopted a dog that I had cared for at an animal refugee shelter in Thailand. Siam Sam was one of hundreds of street dogs left behind in an evacuated city about 50 miles north of Bangkok. His was one of the cities hardest-hit by record floodwaters. The human residents had been evacuated from the disaster zone, but the abandoned dogs – street dogs as well as family pets – were left behind and had nowhere to go to get away from floodwaters. They climbed onto any surface that was above the water level.

Sam and several other dogs were spotted by an animal rescue team organized by Soi Dogs and the Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand (WFFT) and photographed as they peered out from the second-story window of an unfinished building. It was their safety zone from the floods, but there was no food and they were facing certain death by starvation or disease, not to mention being easy targets for poachers of the dog meat trade. Sam was one of the lucky ones rescued and evacuated to a shelter.

I met Sam in one of these emergency shelters in Thailand when I went there to do relief work. He was one of hundreds of dogs housed in a cattle quarantine facility with four or more dogs to a stall. I can't say exactly why, amidst all of the hardship in the shelter, Sam stood out to me. He made me laugh every day. He was silly, but in a noble kind of way, like he was clowning around to lighten the mood for the other dogs and the volunteers. He didn't seem to be affected the same way a lot of other dogs were; as the days of close quarters in the shelter stretched into weeks, many of the dogs got more and more stressed. Fights broke out constantly. Several dogs succeeded in chewing their way through the bars in ef-

Siam Sam (right) and two other dogs are spotted by WFFT animal rescue workers in the second-story window of a flooded and unfinished building, where they had taken shelter from floodwaters in Thailand. PHOTO BY EMMA CARTER.





Sam is given food by a rescuer; shortly afterward, he and the other dogs in the flooded building were captured, sedated, taken by boat to a truck, and transported to a makeshift shelter for evacuated animals, where Sandi Thompson first met him. PHOTO BY EMMA CARTER.

forts to escape; some withdrew and shut down. Sam seemed calm in comparison; he smiled and did something goofy each time I went inside his stall.

It was grueling work to take care of hundreds of dogs in such a crude facility in sweltering heat, with just a handful of volunteers – and yet Sam was able to make me smile every day. He began to really grow on me and I knew I'd miss him the most.

Two days before I was to fly home, I went inside Sam's stall for the nighttime feeding and he grabbed onto my waist with both paws, buried his head in my hip and wouldn't let go. He repeated this behavior every time I went into his kennel for the next two days. I knew that dogs who were unclaimed a few weeks after the cities were repopulated would be returned to those city streets – and I found that I simply could not leave Sam to an uncertain future on the streets of Thailand. I made arrangements to have Sam shipped to me if he wasn't claimed.

About 30 days later I flew to Los Angeles and met him at the airport. I was excited to see him again, but concerned about how he survived the flight. Sam was visibly shaken from the 20-plus hour flight and I couldn't tell if he recognized me or not. He had become quite thin since the last time I saw him and he had lost a lot of hair. Since I said goodbye to him in Thailand, he had been moved to two different shelters while waiting to get his papers in order. He was well looked after, but I think his mental state deteriorated from all of the stress. I rented a luxury sedan so that he would be as comfortable as possible and Siam Sam and I drove home to Berkeley, California.

I spent the next week or so slowly getting him used to living in a house. He was afraid of being indoors and walking

through any kind of doorway. He was happiest outside, so we spent a lot of time going into and coming out of the house. I offered him his choice of three different sizes and shapes of comfy plush beds and he chose to curl up on the cold floor each and every night (now he will not even consider sleeping on any bed less than six inches thick!).

Once it seemed that he was getting comfortable, I decided to leave him (and my other dog) for about 20 to 30 minutes while I went to the store. This was a big mistake. I should have tested a shorter absence first. I came home to the frightening spectacle of Sam hysterically screaming and frantically panting. His forelegs were bloody and his pupils dilated. The kitchen doors and windows had claw and teeth marks indicating where he tried to escape. Curtains were chewed and fecal matter was spread all over the floor and walls. My heart sank – but I hoped that it was a short-term problem that I had caused by leaving him too soon and for too long.

I tried again a couple of days later, but this time it was an experiment, rather than a real departure. He had been crated a lot during his stay in the shelters in Thailand and had been fine, so I thought he might do better in a crate. I put him in a crate with a food-stuffed toy, walked out of the house and spied on him from a window. His reaction was immediate and heart-wrenching to observe. He again became hysterical and frantically tried to chew through the bars, and then started chewing his legs.

All this within minutes.

I was stunned. I knew he might have a hard time adjusting to his new life and that it would take patience, time, and understanding – and I was totally on board for that. But I wasn't prepared for the severity of his disorder, and I wasn't prepared for the hardship of helping him overcome this affliction. The first couple of times I left Sam were hell for him. My hell began after that.



NEW BUT FAMILIAR

I have helped hundreds of owners of dogs with mild separation anxiety (SA). I could probably recite in my sleep the steps that an owner needs to take in order to modify mild to moderate SA behaviors. However, when a client came to me with a dog who had a moderate to severe case, I would refer them to another trainer. It's not that I felt I was unqualified to help owners through this process; I understood the theoretical steps to modify the behavior. Honestly, it was that I couldn't imagine standing in their shoes.

Seriously. I couldn't fathom *never* leaving a dog alone throughout the lengthy training process and making all the difficult life changes necessary. Rehabilitating a dog suffering from severe SA may require *months* of painfully incremental steps of desensitizing the dog to his fear of being left alone and/or confinement. During this tedious process the dog should never be left alone. I couldn't picture myself spending hours each week of mindlessly dull, repetitive desensitizing departures with the dog's success measured in seconds! So how could I advise someone else to do it?

Well, that was then; this was now. Now *I* was the owner of a dog with severe SA. I needed to get over regretting Sam's adoption and feeling sorry for myself and get to work.

Here is what I knew I needed to do, and what I immediately started doing for Sam:

- Made an appointment with a veterinarian, to make sure he was well and didn't have a health problem that could be contributing to the issue – and, just as importantly, to get a prescription for an anti-anxiety medication for Sam.
- Increased his daily exercise.
- Started “alone” training, to begin helping him to be comfortable away from me. (I have another dog, but as in most severe SA cases, Sam couldn't have cared less whether my other dog was home with him or not; he was anxious about being away from humans.) We worked particularly on minuscule stays, “go to your place,” and rewarding calm behavior.
- Started using counter-conditioning, by giving him food-stuffed Kong toys to work on while I was in another room.

DEPARTURE DESENSITIZING PROTOCOL

This is the sort of desensitizing exercise recommended for a dog with separation anxiety. The goal is to actually do the exercise so many times, in such small increments, and without ever allowing the dog to go “past threshold” (become anxious at all), that the dog becomes bored stiff with your behavior.

I had to desensitize Sam’s “She’s leaving me!” triggers. For Sam, this was walking toward or reaching for the door; being a former street dog, he hadn’t yet learned that an owner who was picking up keys or putting on a coat equaled leaving. I included these things anyway. During these exercises I was in “robot mode”— showing no emotion at all and ignoring Sam. I was keeping a very close eye on him though – making sure he showed absolutely no sign of anxiety. My goal during these exercises was for him to become so bored with my comings and goings that he stopped paying attention to them at all. Here is the sort of thing that I would do:

- ✓ Calmly and while ignoring Sam, pick up keys, sit back down. Repeat every few minutes (keeping time variable).
- ✓ Pick up keys, stand up, take a few steps toward door. Put keys down, sit down. Repeat. Adding more steps toward the door until I could touch it.
- ✓ Keys, touch doorknob, sit down.
- ✓ Keys, touch doorknob, turn doorknob, sit down.
- ✓ Keys, turn doorknob, open door a smidgen, shut door, sit down.
- ✓ Keys, turn doorknob, open door a few inches, shut door, sit down.
- ✓ Keys, turn doorknob, open door a foot, shut door, sit down.
- ✓ Keys, turn doorknob, open door wide, shut door, sit down.
- ✓ Keys, turn doorknob, open door wide for two seconds, shut door, sit down.
- ✓ Keys, turn doorknob, open door wide for four seconds, shut door, sit down.
- ✓ Keys, turn doorknob, open door wide for eight seconds, shut door, sit down.
- ✓ Keys, turn doorknob, open door wide for five seconds, step out with one foot, step back in and shut door, sit down.
- ✓ Keys, turn doorknob, open door wide for five seconds, step out with both feet, step back in and shut door, sit down.

✓ Keys, turn doorknob, open door wide for 10 seconds, step out with both feet, step back in and shut door, sit down.

✓ And so on and so on. Or rather, until Sam falls asleep or goes about his other business, completely bored with my antics and unconcerned with my whereabouts.

For the first couple of months, Sam spent weekend mornings at a dog daycare and boarding facility, while Sandi taught her classes.

● Started desensitizing pre-departures and departures, getting him accustomed to my leaving. I endlessly picked up my keys and walked toward the door – and returned. Tediously. Until we were both exhausted and bored with it.

● Used any “can’t hurt/might help” remedies I could think of, including the flower essence remedy called Rescue Remedy, “dog appeasing pheromones” (DAP), a Thundershirt, and the calming music CD *Through a Dog’s Ear*.

● Used “shaping” exercises such as “101 things to do with a box,” to encourage him to engage his brain and offer behaviors that I could reward. I did not want him to always look to me for a cue; I wanted to encourage his independent thinking.

● Resisted cuddling and “babying” Sam because I didn’t want his attachment to me to become even stronger. And I didn’t want to reinforce his anxious behavior.

AND THEN THERE WERE MY NEEDS

I also had to modify my own life quite a bit so that Sam was never left alone. I knew the drill too well: from this moment forward, until he was well on his way to being cured, I would not be able to leave him alone, not ever. My life had just changed dramatically. I was now standing in those shoes that I could not imagine being in before. I was about to enter into an undetermined period of isolation from friends and family, endless hours of desensitizing protocols, ordering all my supplies and groceries online, and the hardest part for me: relying on others for help.

I called a friend of mine who specializes in SA and pleaded with her to help me. I felt dazed by the colossal tasks I was facing and I needed someone to get me started. “Get a support system in place,” she said. “You cannot do this alone.”

I was daunted by what lay before me, but I had no choice. I didn’t want to ask for help, but I knew she was right: I couldn’t do this alone. I have a training business to run, and couldn’t possibly take him with me to every class I taught. I had to find some paid *and* volunteer dog-sitters; I couldn’t afford to pay professionals for all the time I needed sitters!

I sent out a somewhat dramatic email asking for help (I was in a panic!) to a



group of friends – and was amazed to find several patient people willing to watch him on a regular schedule while I worked. I organized a different sitter for each day I was gone so as not to put too much strain on one person; I needed these people to be in it for the long haul.

Not all of the sitters worked out. I had to find people Sam was comfortable with and who I could trust to keep him safe from any extra stress. It was critical that he never be left alone, that he never be punished or stressed or else it would cause a major setback. I had to find people who understood Sam's condition and took this seriously. Some people don't understand the severity of the condition, or believe that it's just attention-seeking behavior, boredom, or "brattiness."

Oddly though, I felt that I could understand the sensation of pure panic suffered by dogs with severe SA, like Sam. One summer when I was about 5 years old, my brother and I were playing around with an old cedar chest. We loved looking at the old photographs and keepsakes my mother kept inside. At one point my brother suggested that I climb inside it and report to him how dark it was once the lid was closed. I remember protesting but then decided it was safe when he crossed his heart, hoped to die, and swore to God he wouldn't lock it. Click. It locked automatically and the key was long lost.

I became panic-stricken. I screamed and kicked and pounded with my fists from the inside. I heard my brother yelling for help as he desperately tried to pry

open the lid. My fear grew worse with every moment I was trapped inside. Extreme panic suffocated me; I felt that I couldn't breathe. I began to try and claw my way out with my bare hands. I will never forget the uncontrollable fear that overtook my mind and body during this incident. It was more than just being scared; it was sheer terror.

This, I imagine, must be close to what a dog with severe SA feels when left alone. I was trapped in that chest for probably five minutes. Most dogs with SA are left alone for 8 to 10 hours a day, five days a week, and for many weeks or months before their owners seek help. Unimaginable! The lucky ones have an owner who finds a trainer or behaviorist who understands the disorder and can coach them through treating and modifying the behavior.

Most, unfortunately, will get bad advice from all sorts of people (trainers included) who do not understand this complex condition, causing the behavior to get worse, and will end up being relinquished to a shelter and/or euthanized.

In the past few months, I've heard stories from other owners of SA dogs who have been advised to crate the dogs and rap sharply on the crate when the dog screams or paws at the cage walls; to spray the caged dog with water; to use a shock collar to "interrupt" the anxious behaviors; and more. It makes my skin crawl to hear these stories, and to imagine how this treatment must make a dog feel when he is already blind with panic and terror.

THE TOLL ON THE OWNER

I am incredibly blessed to have such a wide circle of dog-loving friends, who became Sam's "staff" and looked after him so I could do the bare minimum of work away from home. But because I wanted to minimize how much I had to lean on these valued friends, I cancelled everything else that required me leaving the house without Sam. I stopped making appointments for private consultations with training clients. I also stopped going to the gym, hair appointments, movies, dinner out, and gatherings with friends. I cancelled all my doctor and dentist appointments and professional meetings. I couldn't even go to the store! I ordered all of my groceries and supplies online.

I remember one pathetic moment when I ran out of a few things and my next delivery wasn't due for several days; a friend brought a tube of toothpaste to my workplace for me. I felt very isolated and depressed. My friends slowly stopped including me in get-togethers and I missed five important milestone birthday celebrations of close friends. It seemed at times I would never lead a normal life again. I felt trapped in my own home.

I kept it up, however; I was fully committed to this dog! I was the one who brought him here – I had to see him through it! If behavior modification protocols to treat SA are not followed carefully and correctly, the dog will suffer and have major setbacks.

Here are the things I put into place during this period:

- I found and frequented only the stores/places that allow dogs; for groceries and other things available only where dogs are not allowed, I found stores that would make deliveries.
- I set up a rotating schedule of dog-sitters for Monday, Thursday night, Saturday, and Sunday, during the hours that I teach dog-training classes. (Kim, a friend who is from Thailand, and her husband Vince, offered to dog-sit Sam on Thursday nights, and began a tradition of cooking an elaborate Thai meal that would be ready to share with me – and Sam! – when I got home from teaching

Thank goodness for stores that allow dogs inside. Shopping online can get you only so far!





my night classes. We started calling this event our Thursday night “Ditch and Dine.” Their kindness, generosity, and gracious company brought me to grateful tears many times.)

- I used Web cameras (and later, a program on my iPhone) to monitor Sam’s behavior when I stepped outside my front door, so I could calmly return before he had even a few seconds of anxiety about my absence. In this way, I could stretch my “departures” out as long as possible, without risking a setback.
- I turned down invitations to anything where my dog was not allowed (missing events with friends/family).
- I kept Sam safe from stress.

I was videotaping each “departure” training session so that I could go back and watch to make sure his body language was calm while I was outside the door. Live streaming also made it possible for my trainer friend who specializes in SA to log in and watch the footage on her computer, too. It was helpful to have an extra pair of eyes and I welcomed her opinion. It was really important to have her validate my progress and keep my sanity in check.

After a *month* of practicing every day, I had tediously worked my way up to 90 seconds – a minute and a half when I could consistently walk out the front door and not have Sam become anxious. Then, suddenly, our progress was stopped

Two close friends dog-sit Sam on Thursday nights, and prepare elaborate Thai meals to share afterward. They called this event “Thursday Night Ditch and Dine,” and it helped keep Sandi sane.

in its tracks. Sam was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and needed 6 to 8 weeks of chemotherapy. He had an 80 percent chance of remission with this treatment, so it was a no-brainer for us. However, this was a big setback for our SA work and he had major regression. It was extremely stressful for him to have chemo, and for the next two full months, Sam made *no* progress whatsoever. He obviously felt unwell, and even with his daily Prozac, he was clingy and anxious.

This was incredibly disheartening and depressing for me. My spirits were pretty low at that point. I felt like I had wasted three months of tedious work in total isolation, and I was daunted by the process of starting over from scratch. I was also terrified that I was going to lose my support system. My wonderful dog sitters had already been on the job for three months and now I was back to square one. I was going to lose my mind!

I was lonely, trapped in my own home, and I was tired of being misunderstood. People in my life who were supportive at first were also starting to become skeptical. “Why is it taking so long? You’re being neurotic and making it worse. Just leave him and go to the store, for goodness’ sake. He’ll snap out of it!” I didn’t want to get out of bed in the morning. I couldn’t face another day of it.

SUPPORT IN NUMBERS

Then, one day, I came to the realization that if I, a seasoned trainer, was feeling this way, how on earth do other people who have SA dogs cope? I knew of at least four students in my regular classes who were struggling with SA dogs. They had heard me talk about Sam in class and confided in me that they, too, were battling this problem. That’s when I decided I should start a support group for people with SA dogs – and it was the best thing I’ve ever done.

I found a nearby pub with a large outdoor area and a dog-friendly manager,

An early meeting of Sandi’s “SA Support Group” (and their dogs, of course!) at a local pub. The group also communicates via a Facebook page, to encourage and help each other through difficult times.

and invited those clients to join me for drinks and sympathy. We had a great time at the first get-together and word began to spread. Many people found out about it and pleaded to join. I then started a Facebook group so we can support each other in between pub meetings.

My SA Support Group is comprised of people who are all dealing with or have dealt with a dog with SA. It’s important to understand that the unpleasant feelings are normal, that we aren’t alone, that we are not going crazy, and it will get better. We listen to each other’s struggles and encourage each other to carry on. We congratulate the tiny successes as the major milestones that they really are! Who else is going to get excited about a 30-second increase in the dog’s ability to stay home alone?

The group makes the struggle less of a struggle. Even though I’m a dog trainer, and often find myself giving dog-training advice to others in the group, I can honestly say that our meetings are as therapeutic for me as they are for anyone. I was going bonkers from the lack of socializing! A support group makes the experience far less isolating and validates the hard work that we all do. It also is a big relief that no one is judging us, and we can talk freely without the worry of being labeled as obsessive or neurotic. We all look forward to it; it’s fun and it gives us fuel to carry on. Some of us have already won the race and we find satisfaction in helping others still struggling through it.

It astonishes me that, in my 20-plus years of dog training, I haven’t seen a serious discussion of how life-altering (in a bad way!) dealing with a SA dog can be. One of my fellow “SA club” members (interestingly, another dog training professional who rehabilitated his *own* dog with severe SA) baldly stated, “It can drive grown men to tears.” The fact that this condition is generally misunderstood by most people can further add to feelings of isolation.





Sandi uses Web cameras and an iPhone app to monitor Sam when she leaves him at home. Three cameras ensure she can see him at all times, and the pictures are live-streamed to her phone. This enables her to return quickly if Sam should become upset or anxious while she is gone, to prevent triggering a serious setback.

It baffles me, because this is such an important piece of the puzzle. If the owner, who is already isolated, confused, and distraught about the situation, is not getting support, then she won't be motivated to continue with the lengthy training required to get the dog past his fear. If she doesn't do the work, then the dog doesn't get better. If the dog doesn't get better, the owner is miserable, the dog gets returned to the breeder or shelter and either lives in misery or dies. It seems to me that support should be at the top of the list!

Dealing with an SA dog can also cause strife in friendships and relationships. Many couples have confessed at our group sessions that they argue a lot about the dog and that both parties have periods of feeling envious of, or bitter toward, the other. It is common for one person in a relationship to do most of the work with the dog while the other goes about their life – and this, too, can cause a lot of resentment. A friend struggling with an SA dog told me, “As I kissed my husband goodbye in the morning, I remember thinking how lucky he was that he escaped from the building that had become my prison.” Several have even admitted to me that the other party gave them an ultimatum; that if the dog didn't improve soon, then the dog would be gotten rid of. I can't imagine the extra amount of stress this would add to an already horrible situation!

Some “SA Club” members confessed to feeling guilty for somehow causing the separation anxiety in the first place. Some expressed feeling resentful toward the dog and then feeling guilty for be-

ing resentful! Several admitted to almost losing their jobs because of consistently being late for work or not coming in at all (because of a pet-sitting snafu or general depression).

One thing has become clear to me, as a constant attendee of this club: If an owner does not get support throughout this lengthy process, relationships become strained, employment suffers, motivation wanes, and training stops. Everyone loses in the end, most notably the dog.

This knowledge has helped me through the past few months of working with Sam. I've now learned to stay away from people who are not supportive! If a friend tells me that I should “Just let him cry it out!” or “Just let him deal with it while you go to the store!” I avoid discussing Sam with them, or avoid them altogether.

IT GETS BETTER

I never could have gotten here without my support group and my dog-sitting friends, including Colleen Kinzley, who watched Sam for me at the location where I teach on Monday nights – which also happens to be the place she works every day, and her night off! With the help of all of these special people, I've been able to continue Sam's training and he's been able to make more and more progress. As Sam has improved, and the amount of time that he can be left alone has increased, I have been able to “release” some of my dog-sitting friends from their duties (though I don't know how I will ever repay them for their great kindness).

I still use a camera app for my smartphone, so I am able to watch Sam in real time on my phone when I leave the house. I now have three cameras set at different angles so I can watch him and be ready to come back home if he starts to get upset.

Last night I went to work and left Sam home. I had my cameras running and checked in on him in between the classes I was teaching. I was gone for 5½ hours. He mostly slept the entire time.

I think we've crossed the finish line. It was unspeakably hard, probably harder than anything I've ever done. But I have to say that through this difficult journey some beautiful things have happened: I've made a lot of new caring friends. Even today I cannot believe the selfless efforts that these people made to help Sam and me. I could not have done it without their support and the support of the group I created. I am more grateful to them than I can ever express.

Before this started I was afraid of separation anxiety. Now, because of this journey with Sam, I have a newfound sympathy and understanding of what owners of SA dogs are going through and feel confident and uniquely qualified to help others through this.

Many people have asked me, “If you had known about the SA before you brought Sam home, would you have still brought him home?” I can answer that honestly and without hesitation: No. Had I known what was in store for me I would have tearfully said goodbye and walked away.

But if you ask me now, “Would you do it again?” I'd say absolutely, unequivocally yes. My life is better after all the struggles in so many ways, but mostly it is just better with Siam Sam in it. 🐾

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