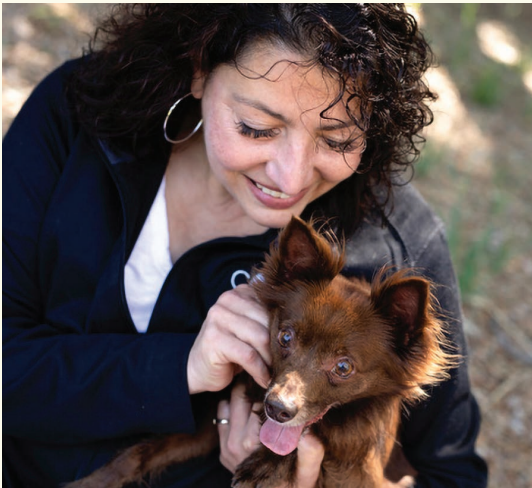




Trainer and Behavior Consultant Malena DeMartini-Price Discusses How to Help Dogs with Separation Anxiety



Separation Anxiety Expert Malena DeMartini with her dog, Tini, enjoying some quality time together at home in Sonoma County, California.

► What first drew you to study dogs with SA and then create a program to help these dogs?

I've been working in the dog industry as a professional trainer for 21 years now. I started early on specializing in separation anxiety. But to be fair, I always tell people separation anxiety chose me, I did not choose it. Very early on in my career, I was contacted by a client who had a dog with separation anxiety, and I immediately thought, oh, gosh, I'm too green of a trainer. I shouldn't work with this. But she was quite desperate, and no one really was willing

to help her, so I said, "full transparency, we're going to kind of do some trial and error." The case was very successful. And because I live in the San Francisco Bay area, a tight-knit community, as soon as people found out that I was successful with a separation anxiety case, the floodgates opened, and I started to receive a lot more of them. As a result, I realized that this was something that needed further investigation and greater understanding on how to work with the problem most efficiently and effectively—there was just not enough solid information out there at the time. So that's what I embarked on—doing a lot of research and eventually publishing my first book, and then recently, my second. It keeps evolving and evolving.

► What are some of the most common behaviors you see in dogs with SA? What are some unexpected behaviors?

One of the things that we really need to do in order to determine whether the dog is having separation-related challenges is observe the dog when left alone. And I want to add a caveat by saying, this doesn't mean you have to leave your dog alone for four hours and watch them the entire time. We can discern the level of panic, whether it's present or not, fairly quickly—usually within the first 10 minutes. I think people really need to understand that this is a phobia, and a phobia by definition is extremely irrational to those that are not experiencing it. But it is very real for the dog.

They are terrified to be left alone. And that doesn't really make a ton of sense to us. As human beings, we're commonly thinking "we come back every day—why is he not figuring that out," but that's not how phobias work. For people to discern whether their dog has separation anxiety, using standalone cameras or some other means of viewing and recording your dog when left alone is really crucial.

There are very important differences in behavior. When you see a video of a dog who is barking at the squirrels and the people walking past side-by-side with a video of a dog displaying true separation anxiety, the difference is obvious. These symptoms may not come from separation anxiety but rather from over-arousal or boredom. But when we see the dogs panicking, that is a very different situation. These behaviors include everything from salivation, vocalization, howling, whining, and tearing things up.

► **You describe SA as a welfare issue and a behavioral emergency where the dog can go into full-blown panic mode. Why is this condition considered to be an emergency?**

We are so primed as human beings to be concerned about "medical" emergencies. Say the dog has a torn ACL—we need to surgically fix this right? Behavior problems, particularly ones like separation anxiety are so tremendously impactful to the animal's welfare—they are experiencing extreme panic. One of the things that's so important is that we realize that this is not just psychological. We have to acknowledge the physiological impacts that continued levels of stress over time can have on the animal. I say it's a welfare issue and I'm mostly referring to the dog welfare, but it's a welfare issue for the pet parents as well. Having a dog that is destroying your house or getting complaints from the neighbors and the landlord—all of these things are very, very stressful. I really feel that we have to treat this as a behavioral emergency. It is not something that's just going to go away if we look the other way for weeks or months or more.

► **What are some of the known causes of SA?**

The majority of dogs who have separation anxiety-related behaviors are experiencing it for so many different reasons, including genetics, environment, or issues that have happened in the dog's past. But the new cute puppy with a sound beginning could also have separation anxiety. It's only been a few years since they isolated a genetic marker, and we are seeing that there's a really important genetic implication there. But—good news—just because something is genetically inspired does not mean that it cannot be modified. Separation anxiety has been the number one most researched dog behavior issue for the past four decades in peer-reviewed studies of applied behavior analysis and veterinary medicine. We've got a lot of good information on it. But interestingly, the area that we have the least amount of information on is what causes separation anxiety. We do know that evolutionarily separation anxiety is appropriate as there is an evolutionary purpose of helping to reunite young pups with mom or the other littermates. If we still see it after the dog has matured, we can kind of consider it to be maladaptive, and it needs to be addressed.

► **In your professional experience, are we seeing an increase in dogs with SA? If yes, why do you feel this is happening?**

In part we've seen this tremendous increase because of COVID with everybody being home with their dogs. We've also seen a tremendous increase because literally over 50% of American households acquired a dog during the pandemic. There's also been a huge increase in awareness about separation anxiety—from national media to local newspapers. I think people are now more aware that this problem can exist in their dog. And lastly, I think the thing that's really turned it around is that more people have access to less expensive home security systems or cameras they can use to watch their dog throughout the day.

► **What are some of the first steps an owner should take if they suspect their dog has SA?**

The first thing that we need to do is “stop the bleeding,” right? Anything that our dogs rehearse they become professionals at. As a dog, you might be a little panicked when mom runs to the grocery store. And then the next day, she goes to a doctor’s appointment and then Monday comes around and she has to go to work, and you are perpetually experiencing and rehearsing panic. I feel strongly that we need to manage the dog in such a way that we are not leaving them alone for longer than they can handle. Owners will say to me “people have to work and have to go to doctor’s appointments, etc.” The reality is that there are so many creative resources available to help you. We have everything from low-cost to no-cost help in friends, family, neighbors, pet sitters, etc. There are more expensive types of care available—you can hire someone to either bring the dog to their home or stay with the dog in your home. There are so many creative options. I don’t want people to just sort of close the door and say “yeah, I can’t do that.” Because if people couldn’t do it then the many, many thousands of clients that I and the certified separation anxiety trainers have worked with would not have been able to positively change their dogs’ lives. As a matter of fact, over 80% of the clients that contact us tell us that they are already not leaving the dog alone.

We just need to stop that panic from going into overdrive because chronic stress will change the dog’s brain chemistry. It will crowd out happy feelings and just get bigger and bigger and become more profound. I think it’s so important for people to hear that we are not saying you can never leave your house for the rest of your life, there’s just a certain amount of time at the beginning of the process when we do need the dog to not be left alone.

► **Is there a general time frame for how long it may take to help a dog with SA? Every dog is unique of course, but is there a certain amount of time in terms of days, weeks, months, or longer for which you advise owners to be prepared to work on this issue?**

This is the most common question that I get asked and I understand and genuinely empathize with it, but it really is very dependent on the dog. Like people, dogs are such unique individuals, so it is very dependent on that dog and that dog’s ability to make progress with their alone time. I do say “don’t think in terms of weeks, think in terms of months. Don’t stress out that it might be in terms of years.” When we think about the life expectancy of the dog being at least 15 years, then those months are well worth it to ensure not only the dog’s well-being physically and emotionally but also our own well-being. We don’t want to spend 15 years not being able to leave our animal, so spending some time to address the problem early on is important.