

PupShelf

THE HOME ALONE PROTOCOL

**Teach your dog that an empty
house is nothing to worry about**



Topics Included

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Being Left Alone Isn't One Problem



The two dogs behind the same closed door

You pick up your keys. Within seconds, your dog is pacing, whining, or already tearing at the door frame. By the time you're back, there's a mess to deal with – a chewed cushion, a puddle by the door, a neighbor's note about the barking.

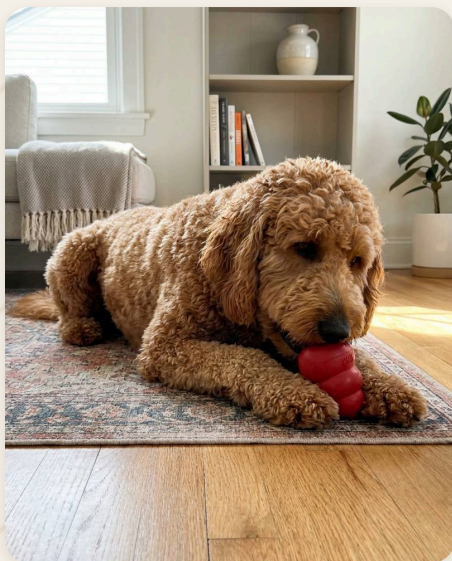
Being Left Alone Isn't One Problem

If your Goldendoodle came home somewhere between 2020 and 2022, this scene may feel especially familiar. More than 23 million US households brought home a pet during that stretch, and a huge share of those dogs never experienced your absence as an ordinary part of the day – you were simply always there. When offices started calling people back, those same dogs were asked, almost overnight, to tolerate something they'd never had reason to practice. If that's your dog's story, you didn't do anything wrong by working from home with a puppy underfoot, and you're far from the only household living this right now.

Search for help with this and you'll find one word covering all of it: separation anxiety. One diagnosis, one set of exercises, applied to every dog that struggles alone.

That's a problem, because "struggles when left alone" isn't one behavior with one cause. It's the visible symptom of at least two very different internal experiences – and the fix that calms one can do almost nothing for the other.

Being Left Alone Isn't One Problem



Clingy isn't the same as struggling

Before splitting this into two problems, it's worth naming what isn't a problem at all. A dog that trails you from room to room, waits outside the bathroom door, and flops down wherever you happen to stop moving is showing you attachment, not dysfunction. *Whole Dog Journal*, the trade publication that popularized the term "Velcro dog," draws a clean line here: a genuinely healthy clingy dog quietly settles and waits once you've actually left. If your dog is glued to you all day but relaxes the moment the door closes, you very likely don't have a training problem on your hands – you have an affectionate dog. This chapter, and the rest of this book, is for the dogs where that settling never comes.

Being Left Alone Isn't One Problem



Panic versus boredom

Picture the difference between a person who's frightened and a person who's simply, furiously bored. Both might pace. Both might struggle to sit still. But you'd comfort one and hand the other a task, and offering the wrong one to the wrong person doesn't help at all.

Genuine separation distress is a panic response. The dog isn't choosing to be difficult – its nervous system has registered that the person it's attached to has left, and it responds the way any animal responds to a perceived loss of safety: escalating stress hormones, a racing heart, an overwhelming urge to get back to that person by any means available, including through a door.

Being Left Alone Isn't One Problem

Isolation frustration looks similar from the outside – barking, chewing, pacing – but comes from a completely different place. This dog isn't panicking about your absence specifically. It's a sharp, active mind with nothing to do, for hours, in a house that has suddenly become very boring. The destruction isn't a cry for you. It's what happens when a brain built to solve problems runs out of problems to solve and starts generating its own.

One more layer inside "genuine distress"

Genuine separation distress itself isn't always about you personally, and there's a simple test that tells you which version you're facing. Some dogs are panicking about your specific absence – they'd be perfectly settled with almost anyone else in the house, they're just missing you. This is attachment-specific separation anxiety. Other dogs are panicking about being alone at all, full stop – a pet sitter, a neighbor, even another animal in the room is enough to keep them calm, because the problem was never about who was missing, only that nobody was there. That version has its own name in clinical behavior work: isolation distress.

Being Left Alone Isn't One Problem

The test: does having literally anyone else present – a sitter, a friend, a second pet – settle your dog, even if it's not the person they're most bonded to? If yes, you're looking at isolation distress. If your dog only relaxes with one particular person and nobody else will do, that's the more classic, attachment-specific pattern. Either way, the training in this book works the same way – Chapter 6 comes back to this question directly if your dog's answer isn't obvious yet.

Why your dog's other parent breed matters here

This is where the two halves of your dog's ancestry pull in different directions again, the same way they did with training and with grooming.

A Golden Retriever was bred to stay tuned to a person constantly – to watch, to check in, to want to be near. That wiring doesn't switch off when the front door closes. A Golden-leaning dog's distress at being left is often closer to genuine attachment distress: it isn't bored, it's actively missing the person it was built to track.

A Poodle was bred to think independently and solve problems without supervision. A Poodle-leaning dog left alone with nothing to do isn't usually panicking about your absence – it's an unemployed genius, and unemployed geniuses redecorate. The chewed doorframe often isn't grief. It's the closest thing available to a puzzle.

Being Left Alone Isn't One Problem

If you ran the Doorway Test from the main guide, you already have a strong clue which side of this your dog leans toward – and it's worth revisiting here, because the fixes in this book are ordered to work with either pattern, but they work faster once you know which one you're mostly dealing with.

One honest caveat: the Golden-leans-panic, Poodle-leans-boredom split above is this book's own pattern reading, built from each parent breed's well-documented temperament – it isn't a claim pulled from a published study on doodle mixes specifically. Treat it as a useful starting guess, not a diagnosis, and let what you actually see on camera in the next section overrule it every time.

Telling the two apart in your own dog

You don't need a behaviorist's checklist to get a useful read. Watch what happens in the first two minutes after you leave, if you can, using a phone propped up on a shelf.

A dog leaning toward genuine distress tends to escalate immediately and near the exit – scratching at the door itself, vocalizing that sounds distressed rather than demanding, drooling, and showing little interest in anything else in the room, including food or toys left out for it.

Being Left Alone Isn't One Problem

A dog leaning toward boredom-driven frustration tends to settle for a short while first, then get restless once nothing interesting has happened for a stretch – and its destruction is often not concentrated at the exit at all. It's the sofa cushion, the bin, the shoes by the door: whatever offered the most interesting problem to solve, wherever that happened to be.

Most real dogs sit somewhere on a spectrum between these two, and a small amount of both is common. But knowing which end your dog leans toward changes where you start in Chapter 3 – and it changes what “getting better” actually looks like, because a bored dog needs a job, while a panicking dog needs to be taught, in tiny steps, that the door closing is not actually a loss.

What to take from this chapter

Being Left Alone Isn't One Problem

1. "My dog can't be left alone" describes at least two different problems, and they need different fixes.
2. Genuine separation distress is panic about your absence specifically. Isolation frustration is boredom from an understimulated, independent mind.
3. Genuine distress itself splits further into attachment-specific anxiety (only one person's absence triggers it) and isolation distress (being alone at all is the trigger, regardless of who's missing) – Chapter 6 has the test to tell them apart.
4. Golden-leaning dogs tend toward the panic side; Poodle-leaning dogs tend toward the boredom side – though most dogs carry some of both, and this pairing is this book's own working theory, not a cited study.
5. Watch the first two minutes on camera before assuming which one you're dealing with. Where the destruction happens, and how quickly it starts, is real information.
6. A dog that's clingy while you're home but settles once you've actually left doesn't have a training problem – that's normal attachment, not distress.

Chapter 2 looks at why the standard advice – a bigger crate, a longer walk beforehand, "they'll get used to it" – fails to fix either version of this problem, before Chapter 3 gets into what actually does.

Being Left Alone Isn't One Problem

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Why



Four fixes everyone tries first

Why

Fix one: a longer walk before you leave. This is the most common advice on the internet, and it helps less than people expect. A tired body can still have an anxious or under-occupied mind – physical exercise burns energy, but it doesn't teach a dog that the door closing is safe, and it doesn't give a bored problem-solver anything to do for the four hours after the tiredness wears off, which is usually well before you're home.

Fix two: a bigger, better crate. For a dog that finds the crate genuinely comforting, this can help with containment – but containment isn't the same as calm. A dog in genuine distress inside a secure crate is often just as distressed, minus the destroyed furniture. A bored dog in a bigger crate is a bored dog with more room to pace in. Neither problem is actually being addressed.

Fix three: "they'll get used to it." This is true for some ordinary, low-level adjustment, and false for real distress or genuine boredom. A dog practicing panic every single day doesn't habituate to it – it rehearses it, and rehearsed panic tends to get more efficient, not less, the same way any well-practiced response does. A bored dog left with nothing to do doesn't get less bored with repetition either; it just gets better at finding things to destroy.

Why

Fix four: punishment after the fact. You come home to a chewed doorframe, and the temptation is to react to what you see. But by the time you're home, the door has been chewed for anywhere from ten minutes to four hours ago – the dog cannot connect a correction now to a specific decision made that long ago. What it can and does learn is that you coming home is sometimes followed by something unpleasant, which is the opposite of what you want a dog to feel about your return.



Why “just leave and don’t make a fuss” isn’t the whole answer either

Why

You'll also hear the opposite advice: don't make departures emotional, don't say goodbye, just go. This part is genuinely useful and Chapter 3 builds on it – but on its own, it's incomplete. A calm, low-key departure removes one source of extra stress. It doesn't teach a distressed dog that the absence itself is survivable, and it doesn't give a bored dog a job. Removing a small aggravating factor isn't the same as building the actual skill.

The real target: duration, not distraction

Here's what all of these fixes have in common – none of them touch the dog's actual experience of time alone, second by second. A longer walk changes the dog's energy level at minute zero. A bigger crate changes its surroundings. Neither changes what happens in the dog's head at minute three, or minute twenty, when you are genuinely, unambiguously not there.

The two things that actually work are built directly around that gap:

For genuine distress, the gap has to be rebuilt in tiny, successful pieces. You cannot talk a panicking nervous system into calm, but you can teach it, through hundreds of short and successful absences, that a closed door does not mean you are gone forever. This is slow, deliberate work, and Chapter 3's threshold game is built entirely around it.

Why

For boredom-driven frustration, the gap needs a legitimate job in it. A bored, capable mind that has something worth solving for the first stretch of your absence is far less likely to go looking for a problem of its own. This isn't a distraction trick – it's giving the actual drive behind the destruction somewhere real to go.

Most households need a blend of both, in the proportions Chapter 1 helped you estimate. Neither works well alone; together, they cover almost every version of this problem.

What to take from this chapter

1. A longer walk, a bigger crate, and “they’ll get used to it” all fail because none of them change the dog’s actual experience of the time you’re gone.
2. Punishing evidence found after you return teaches your dog to fear your homecoming, not to avoid the behavior.
3. A calm, low-key departure helps, but it’s a small piece, not the whole fix.
4. Real progress needs two things working together: rebuilding tolerance to absence in tiny steps, and giving a bored mind a legitimate job to do.

Chapter 3 is where both of those live – five specific games, built for exactly this split.

Why

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The Five Games



How to use this chapter

The Five Games

These five games split cleanly across the two problems from Chapter 1. Games 1, 2, and 4 rebuild tolerance for genuine distress, in small deliberate steps. Games 3 and 5 handle the boredom side and the return itself. Run all five regardless of which way your dog leans – most dogs carry a little of both, and none of these games conflict with each other.

The single most important rule across all five: **never advance faster than your dog can handle calmly.** Rushing the duration in Game 2 is the single most common reason this kind of training fails, and it doesn't just fail to help – a bad experience during training can actively set the dog back further than doing nothing at all.

There's a second rule that carries just as much weight, and it isn't limited to training sessions – it covers every absence, real-life included, for as long as you're running these games: **don't let your dog experience an absence longer than what training has actually proven it can handle.** A grocery run, a full workday, a night out with friends – any of these can undo weeks of careful, patient progress if they land before your dog is ready for that length, because a panicking nervous system doesn't know the difference between "this is training" and "this is real life." If you genuinely need to be gone longer than your dog currently tolerates, that's a job for a dog walker, a daycare day, or a family member – not an unavoidable exception. Chapter 7 walks through what to do if this rule gets broken by accident, but the point of setting it now is to never need that chapter at all.

The Five Games



Game 1 – The Boring Goodbye

Dogs learn to read departure cues with remarkable precision – keys, a coat, shoes, a particular bag – and for a distress-prone dog, the anxiety often starts the moment those cues appear, well before the door ever closes. This game breaks the link between the cue and the departure.

What you need: the specific items your dog has learned to associate with you leaving – keys, a certain coat, your shoes, a work bag.

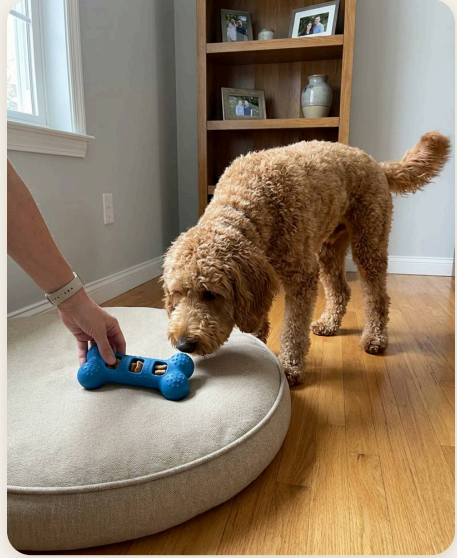
How to run it:

The Five Games

1. Several times a day, at random moments when you have no intention of actually leaving, pick up your keys, put on your coat, or grab your bag – then sit back down and carry on with something else entirely.
2. Repeat this often enough that the cue stops reliably predicting a departure. Some repetitions should lead to you leaving for real thirty seconds later; most shouldn't lead to a departure at all.
3. Once your dog stops reacting to the cues themselves, they've lost their predictive power, and Game 2 becomes noticeably easier to run.

Goal: your dog stops reacting to the sight of keys, shoes, or a coat, because those objects no longer reliably predict that you're about to leave.

The Five Games



Game 2 – Threshold Seconds

This is the core exercise for genuine separation distress, and it works by proving, in amounts small enough to always succeed, that you reliably come back.

What you need: patience, and a willingness to go slower than feels necessary – this game is won by never once triggering a full-blown panic response during practice.

How to run it:

The Five Games

1. With your dog calm and settled, walk to your front door, open it, step fully outside, and close it behind you for a count of two or three seconds. Then come back in immediately, calmly, without a big greeting.
2. If your dog stayed reasonably settled, repeat, extending the duration each round. A rule of thumb many separation-anxiety trainers use: roughly a 10-20% increase over the previous successful round – in practice that's usually a 10 to 30 second jump while you're still working in seconds or low minutes, not a leap from ten calm seconds straight to a twenty-minute errand. If your dog escalated, you went too fast – go back to the last duration that worked and stay there longer before extending again.
3. Over days and weeks, extend from seconds to minutes, and eventually to a genuine short outing. There is no fixed schedule – some dogs move through this in days, others need weeks, and the pace is set entirely by what your dog can handle calmly.
4. Keep departures and returns low-key throughout. No dramatic goodbye, no big hello. The point you're proving is that leaving and coming back are both completely unremarkable events.

Goal: your dog experiences hundreds of successful short absences, each one proving a little more convincingly that a closed door is not a permanent loss.

The Five Games

Never extend the duration after a session that went badly. A single overwhelming absence can undo days of careful progress, because it reintroduces the exact panic response you're working to prevent.



Game 3 – The Job Box

This is the outlet for the boredom half of the problem – a dedicated resource that exists only when you're gone, so being left alone becomes associated with something genuinely good rather than something merely tolerated.

What you need: a specific puzzle feeder or food-stuffed toy that is reserved exclusively for departures – never offered at any other time.

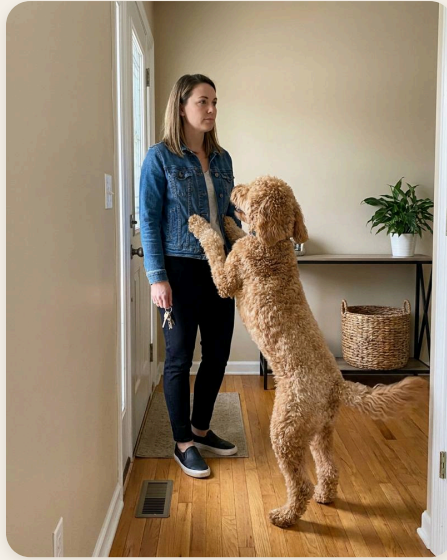
The Five Games

How to run it:

1. Choose one or two puzzle toys and use them only in the seconds before you leave. Never let your dog see or access them at any other point in the day.
2. Because that item only ever appears right before a departure, it starts to predict something worth looking forward to, rather than something to dread.
3. Make the contents genuinely engaging – the goal is real problem-solving time, not something finished in ten seconds.
4. Retrieve the toy once you're home, so it stays special and reserved for exactly one context.

Goal: the first stretch of every departure is filled with a job worth doing, so a bored, capable mind has somewhere better to put its attention than the nearest door frame.

The Five Games



Game 4 – The Settle-Apart

Before asking a dog to be calm in an empty house, it helps enormously to first build calm settling in another room while you're still home – a smaller, safer version of the same skill.

What you need: a mat or bed in a room separate from wherever you usually are, and a baby gate or door if you have one.

How to run it:

The Five Games

1. With your dog settled on its mat, walk into another room for a short moment while your dog can still hear you moving around the house.
2. Return calmly before your dog gets up or becomes distressed, and reward the settled behavior once you're back.
3. Gradually increase how long you're in the other room, and how much of the house separates you, before adding a closed door between you.
4. Only move to full departures from Game 2 once your dog can settle through several minutes of this kind of in-house separation.

Goal: your dog learns to stay settled while physically apart from you before ever being asked to do it with you gone entirely.

The Five Games



Game 5 – The Calm Return

The Five Games

How you come home is one small piece of the picture, and it's worth doing well even though the science behind it is less settled than most advice makes it sound. The common claim – that a wildly excited reunion every single time raises the emotional contrast between you-here and you-gone and makes the gap harder over time – is a reasonable, low-risk precaution, not a proven mechanism. Two university studies out of Texas Tech, summarized by a leading certified applied animal behaviorist, found no meaningful link between how dramatic an owner's greetings and departures were and how severe their dog's separation distress actually was – if anything, dogs belonging to higher-energy owners scored very slightly lower on distress, not higher. So keep your reunions calm because it's cheap, harmless, and removes one small source of extra stimulation right when your dog is already keyed up – not because dramatic hellos are a demonstrated cause of the underlying problem.

What you need: nothing but a plan for the first sixty seconds after you walk through the door.

How to run it:

The Five Games

1. When you arrive home, ignore excited jumping, barking, or spinning – no talking, no eye contact, no touching – until your dog has four paws on the floor and has settled even slightly.
2. The moment there's a calmer moment, however brief, greet your dog warmly then.
3. Over time, your dog learns that a calm greeting, not a frantic one, is what gets your attention when you walk in.

Goal: reunions become calm rather than a nightly celebration of relief – a small, low-cost habit worth keeping consistent, even though it isn't proven on its own to lower separation distress.

What to take from this chapter

The Five Games

1. Games 1, 2, and 4 rebuild genuine tolerance to being left, in small steps that always succeed.
2. Game 3 gives a bored mind a legitimate job during the part of the day it's most likely to go looking for one.
3. Game 5 keeps reunions low-key – a cheap, harmless habit worth keeping, even though the research behind “calm returns lower anxiety” is thinner than most advice implies.
4. Never advance faster than your dog can handle calmly – extend by roughly 10-20% per successful round, and never extend at all after a session that went badly.
5. Suspend any absence – training or real-life – longer than your dog has actually proven it can handle, for the whole time you're running these games.

Chapter 4 covers how to set up the room itself so these five games are easy to run consistently, without having to improvise the details each time.

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Set the Room Up to Win



Two fixed spots, not a different setup every time

Games 3 and 4 both work better when they happen in the same place, arranged the same way, every single time. A dog that has to figure out a new environment on top of a new skill is being asked to do two hard things at once. A fixed setup turns half of the work into a habit before the training even starts.

Set the Room Up to Win

The departure station

Pick one specific spot near wherever your dog tends to settle when you leave – often near a favorite bed, not necessarily near the door itself. This is where the Job Box from Game 3 always appears, at the same point in your routine, every time you go.

Consistency here does real work: the same spot, the same object, appearing at the same moment in your leaving routine, builds a genuine expectation faster than a different toy in a different corner each day. Keep the station stocked and ready so there's never a scramble for something interesting in the seconds before you walk out the door.

Set the Room Up to Win



The settle-apart room

Set the Room Up to Win

Choose one specific room, away from the busiest part of the house, for Game 4's practice sessions – the same mat, the same door or gate, every time. A dog that has already learned "this particular room, with this particular mat, is where calm happens" carries that expectation into it far faster than a room chosen at random each session.

If you have a baby gate, use it here before switching to a fully closed door – being able to see and hear you through the bars is a smaller ask than being fully shut away, and it gives you a middle step between "in the same room" and "genuinely alone."

Putting both to work together

Between a reliable departure station and a dedicated settle-apart room, most of what Chapter 3's games ask of your dog stops requiring any thought from you – the environment itself is doing part of the training. That consistency is what turns five good exercises into a habit that holds up on the days you're rushed, tired, or running late, which in most households is most days.

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The One-Page Checklist



Print this page

Stick this on the fridge or by the front door. Most setbacks in this kind of training come from one skipped step on a rushed morning, not from the method itself.

The One-Page Checklist

Before you even reach for your keys

- ☐ The Job Box is stocked and ready at the departure station.
- ☐ You have a few spare minutes – not a frantic, running-late exit.
- ☐ Keys, coat, and shoes have been picked up and put down as non-events earlier today (Game 1).

Every departure, every time

- ☐ No dramatic goodbye. Keep it low-key and brief.
- ☐ The Job Box goes down in its usual spot before you go, not after.
- ☐ If you're still building duration with Game 2, don't exceed the longest length your dog has handled calmly so far – and that limit applies to every absence today, not just training sessions. A longer real-life absence today means a dog walker, daycare, or family help instead, not an exception.

The One-Page Checklist



Every time you come home

- ☐ Ignore jumping, spinning, and barking until four paws are on the floor and there's a calmer moment.
- ☐ Check the departure station and settle-apart room briefly, calmly – not as a dramatic inspection.

The One-Page Checklist

- ❑ No punishment for anything found, regardless of what it is or how long ago it happened.

Once a week

- ❑ Review with everyone in the house: is anyone still doing a big, emotional goodbye or hello? It's a low-cost habit worth keeping consistent even though the evidence that it prevents anxiety is thinner than most advice suggests – but one exception makes it hard to tell whether the habit is even being followed.
- ❑ If duration training has stalled at the same length for two weeks, re-read Chapter 7 before pushing further.

One flag that means stop and get help

- ❑ Self-injury, non-stop panic for the entire time you're gone, or a dog that cannot tolerate even a few seconds alone without significant distress – this needs a veterinarian and a certified behaviorist, not more solo practice. Chapter 7 covers this in full.

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Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask



"How do I actually tell if it's anxiety or boredom?"

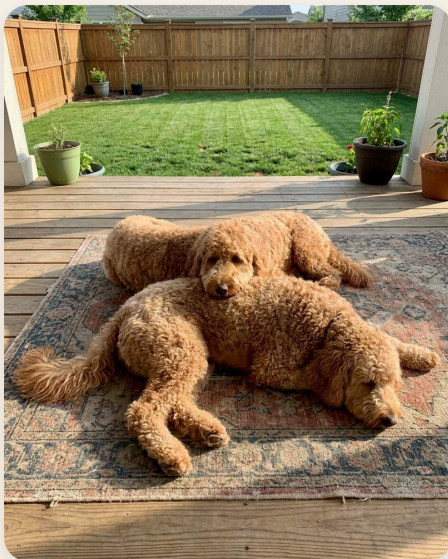
Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

Set up a phone camera and watch the first two minutes. Immediate, intense reaction concentrated at the exit – scratching the door, distressed vocalizing, no interest in food – points toward genuine distress. A short calm period followed by scattered destruction elsewhere in the house points toward boredom. Most dogs show a mix; whichever pattern dominates tells you where to put the most effort in Chapter 3.

“My dog is fine for the first hour, then destructive after that – what does that mean?”

That’s a strong sign of boredom rather than panic – a genuinely anxious dog usually struggles early, not after a calm stretch. This points squarely at Game 3. Make sure the Job Box is engaging enough to last well past that first hour, and consider a second, different puzzle timed to appear partway through a long day.

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask



"Should I get a second dog so mine isn't alone?"

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

Usually not as a fix for this specific problem. Two dogs can keep each other company, but a dog with genuine separation distress is often distressed about your absence specifically, not simply about being alone, and a second dog doesn't resolve that. A peer-reviewed veterinary study of over 200 dogs backs this up directly: having another pet in the home wasn't associated with any lower risk of separation anxiety. The same study did turn up one real risk factor worth knowing if you live alone with your dog – dogs in single-adult households were roughly 2.5 times as likely to have separation anxiety as dogs in multi-person homes, likely because there's no one else around to soften the loss when that one person leaves. If that's your household, it doesn't mean a bigger problem is inevitable; it just means the training in this book is worth taking seriously from day one rather than treating it as optional. And getting a second dog can also mean you now have two dogs to retrain if the new one is unsettled by the first's stress.

“Does leaving the TV or music on actually help?”

It can help take the edge off boredom by masking outside noises that might otherwise trigger barking, and it's a fine addition. It is not a substitute for Chapter 3's training – background noise doesn't teach a dog anything about tolerating your absence, it just makes the environment slightly less stimulating to react to.

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask



"My dog only destroys things near the front door – is that different from destroying things all over the house?"

Yes, and it's a useful clue. Damage concentrated right at the exit – door frames, the area immediately inside the door – leans toward genuine distress about your specific departure. Damage scattered around the house, especially things that are simply interesting to chew or dig into, leans more toward general boredom. Weight Chapter 3's games accordingly.

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

“How long before Threshold Seconds gets me to a full workday?”

There's no fixed timeline, and dogs with more established distress take longer than dogs just starting to build the skill. Some households reach a full workday in a few weeks; others take a couple of months, particularly if early sessions were rushed before this training began. Consistent daily practice, without ever pushing past what your dog can handle calmly, is what determines the pace – not the calendar.

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask



"Is it cruel to crate my dog while I'm doing this training?"

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

Not if your dog already finds the crate comfortable and safe, which you'll know because it settles there voluntarily at other times. If your dog shows any distress specifically about being crated – as opposed to being left alone generally – the crate itself needs its own separate, gentle introduction before it's used for departures, or it should be skipped in favor of a safe room instead.

Two lines that are not negotiable. **A dog in genuine panic must never be shut in a crate.** Owners describe bent bars, bloodied paws and broken teeth from dogs trying to escape one – the confinement does not contain the panic, it adds to it. And **the crate is never a punishment.** The moment it is used that way it stops being the safe place this whole chapter depends on.

“My dog barks the whole time I’m gone but there’s no damage when I get home – is that still a problem?”

Yes. Barking without damage often means a dog on the boredom or mild-distress end of the spectrum rather than the severe end, but it's frequently a genuine neighbor and welfare issue on its own, and it's worth addressing with Chapter 3 even though your furniture looks fine.

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

“Can I use anti-anxiety medication instead of training?”

Medication can be genuinely helpful for real separation anxiety, but it works by making the training possible, not by replacing it – it lowers the baseline stress enough that a dog can actually learn from the graduated exercises in Chapter 3. Two of the medications used for this, fluoxetine and clomipramine, are FDA-approved specifically for treating separation anxiety in dogs – not an off-label borrow from a human prescription, but a treatment built and approved for exactly this condition, which is worth knowing if a vet suggests one and it still feels like an unusual step. This decision, including which drug and what dose, belongs with your vet or a veterinary behaviorist, not with a book.

“My dog is fine with one person leaving but panics when the other leaves – why?”

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

This usually points to attachment-specific separation anxiety – panic tied to one particular person, which is different from the pattern Chapter 1 calls isolation distress, where literally anyone else’s presence, not just yours, would settle the dog. You can sharpen the read with a quick test: does your dog settle if a third person – a sitter, a neighbor, a friend – is home instead of either of you? If a third person does settle your dog, that confirms the attachment-specific pattern, and you should run Threshold Seconds and the Calm Return with the person your dog is most attached to leaving and returning, since that’s the actual scenario that needs desensitizing – practicing with the less-attached person mostly teaches a lesson your dog didn’t need. If your dog is unsettled even with a third person present, that’s isolation distress rather than a one-person attachment problem, and the same games still apply, just without assuming one specific person has to run them.

“What about doggy daycare instead of fixing this?”

Daycare is a legitimate management option on the days it’s available, and it sidesteps the problem entirely rather than solving it – which is a reasonable trade-off for some households. It won’t help your dog cope on the days daycare isn’t an option, so most owners find it works best alongside this training, not instead of it.

Twelve Questions Doodle Owners Actually Ask

“My puppy cries the second I leave the room, even in the house – is this the same problem?”

It's the same underlying skill, at an earlier stage, and it's exactly what Game 4 is built for. Start there, in-house, with very short separations, before ever attempting a real departure. A puppy that hasn't learned to tolerate a closed door between rooms isn't ready to practice tolerating a closed front door yet.

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When It Didn't Work



Start with an audit, not a bigger correction

If a couple of weeks of consistent practice haven't moved things, resist the urge to push the duration further or add stricter management. Check these first.

When It Didn't Work

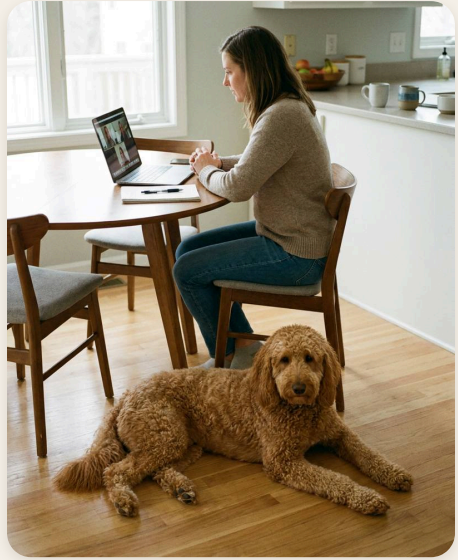
Check for a recent overwhelming absence. Chapter 3 asks you to hold every absence – training or real-life – inside your dog's current tolerance for the entire time you're running these games, precisely to prevent this. But plans change, sitters cancel, and errands run long, so check anyway: one departure that ran longer than your dog was ready for – a longer errand than planned, a delayed return – can undo real progress, because it reintroduces the exact panic response Game 2 is built to prevent. If this happened recently, go back several steps in duration and rebuild more slowly than before, and put a backup plan in place – a neighbor, a dog walker, a daycare day – for the next time a longer absence is unavoidable.

Check that the Job Box is still genuinely interesting. A puzzle that's become too easy or too familiar stops competing with boredom. Rotate what goes in it and how hard it is to get out.

Check for an inconsistent goodbye or hello somewhere in the house. One person doing a big emotional departure or an excited greeting undoes Games 1 and 5 for everyone, because your dog is learning from whichever version happens most dramatically, not most often.

Check the dose. A handful of sessions over one weekend isn't enough repetition for old patterns to shift. Give Chapter 3's games genuine daily practice for two to three weeks before judging the result.

When It Didn't Work



The flag that changes everything: signs of severe distress

If your dog shows any of the following, stop trying to solve this with graduated duration training alone, and involve a professional before continuing: self-injury from attempting to escape, non-stop panic for the entire time you're gone regardless of duration, heavy drooling or panting unrelated to heat or exercise, or elimination indoors specifically tied to being left rather than a housetraining gap.

When It Didn't Work

This level of distress usually needs more than a structured exercise plan. Contact your veterinarian first to rule out a medical contributor and discuss whether medication could make training possible, then work with a certified separation-anxiety trainer or a veterinary behaviorist who can tailor the pace to your specific dog. Two of the medications commonly used here – fluoxetine and clomipramine – carry FDA approval specifically for canine separation anxiety, not an off-label use of a human drug, which is worth knowing if medication comes up and still feels like a bigger step than it is. Medication paired with structured training tends to outperform either approach alone for genuinely severe cases – this is one of the areas where professional support isn't a last resort, it's often the fastest path to an actual fix.

When it's a sudden change, not a long-standing pattern

A dog that has always struggled with being alone is a different situation from a previously easygoing dog that suddenly starts panicking or destroying things when left. A sudden change – especially alongside other new symptoms like increased thirst, changes in appetite, or new stiffness or pain – deserves a veterinary visit before more training. Pain and certain medical conditions can suddenly make a previously tolerant dog unable to cope with being alone, and no amount of graduated duration work fixes a cause that isn't behavioral.

When It Didn't Work

If none of that applies and it's simply slow

Dogs with a longer personal history of distress or boredom-driven destruction typically take longer to change than a habit that started last month. That's expected, not a sign of failure. Keep departures and returns low-key, keep the Job Box genuinely interesting, and keep Threshold Seconds moving at a pace your dog can handle calmly. The dogs that seem the most stuck usually just have the most rehearsed pattern to unlearn.

What to take from this chapter

1. Before escalating, check for a recent overwhelming absence, a stale puzzle, an inconsistent goodbye, or simply not enough practice yet.
2. Self-injury, non-stop panic, or distress-linked elimination indoors is a flag to bring in a vet and a certified behaviorist, not to keep training solo.
3. A sudden change in a previously easygoing dog belongs at the vet first.
4. A longer history with the problem means a longer timeline to fix it – not a method that's failed.

When It Didn't Work

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