

Massachusetts Veterinary Behavior

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Creating a Safe Haven

Dogs with anxiety or fear tend to like to have physical spaces that are safe, predictable, and associated with a history of “good things” happening there. A “safe haven” aims to provide this space in your home away from the hub of activity. It is a place where your dog may go when they may be confronted by fear, such as when guests come over, work is being done around the home, or storms are brewing. Many components of the safe haven are portable, allowing you to designate a safe space when you travel. The basic elements are as follows:

- **White Noise:** Add a source of white noise to places where triggering external sounds are entering (fireworks, thunder, other animals or people inside or outside the home). Depending on the layout of your room/home, this may be next to a window or door. The white noise should be on anytime your dog is in their space, whether you are nearby or not. Options include:
 - Dohm white noise machine (top-of-the-line)
 - Homedics Sound Spa (less expensive)
 - Download free apps to your phone
 - Simplynoise.com streams free white/pink/brown noise
- **Relaxing music:** The album “Through a Dog’s Ear” (Volume 1) has been shown in clinical trials to decrease barking and increase relaxation in shelter dogs. The slow, classical piano music adds a layer of sound to further blunt sounds from the outside world. You may be able to find music of similar style on Pandora or other music streaming options, but please be aware that they should be commercial-free as many ads contain auditory triggers for many of our pets (doorbells, barking dogs, loud and unknow voices, etc.)
- **Consider adding an Adaptil (DAP) plug-in diffuser or diffusing collar.** This is a synthetic form of a pheromone mimics that released by a mother dog when her pup’s nurse, and has a calming effect on some dogs. It is also available as a spray (lasts 1-4 hours).
- **Provide a special treat that will keep your dog busy/entertained each time they go to their Safe Haven and only when in this space.** We recommend a rubber Kong toy stuffed with kibble that has been softened by soaking in low-sodium chicken broth and then frozen to make for long-lasting enrichment. However, you can experiment with different food puzzles or twist n’ treat toys to find something that occupies their attention, decreasing their worry about what might be happening outside their space.
- **Block visual access to triggers:** For dogs who are triggered by passers-by from windows or doorways, block their ability to see these. You can use curtains/shades, opaque

window films applied to the lower half of a slider/door/window, or move furniture so that you are not providing a perch for looking out the window.

- Consider use of a remote camera (Wyze, Nest, Logitech) to monitor your dog's behavior while they are in their Safe Haven. This will give you a lot of insight in to whether your set-up is providing the relaxing environment that you intend, and allows you to brainstorm solutions if you are not. Are they still alerting to noises outside the window? Are they relaxed and sleeping? Are they barking, panting or restless?

The Safe Haven can be an invaluable tool that allows your dog to have a safe, contained place to go when you are not able to directly supervise him/her. IF you find that your dog whines, paces, pants, chews, or is otherwise uncomfortable with being alone in the room initially, we need to first spend some time making them comfortable being in the room alone. To do this, we start with VERY short departures. A sample training plan would be as follows:

Set up the white noise, classical music, DAP, etc. as you would when using the Safe Haven. Then,

Days 1-3: Bring to Safe Haven, give Kong, and stand by door while dog eats it.

Days 4-7: Repeat as above, but stand just outside door

Days 7-21: Repeat as above, but gradually start closing the door incrementally more each day

Days 21+ : Slowly increase the amount of time you are away before opening the door

By breaking up the departure into smaller steps, we can desensitize and counter-condition the dog to be comfortable in the space without your presence. For dogs with a comorbid diagnosis of separation anxiety/confinement anxiety, this is harder and often requires finding the right medication(s) before we can begin training in earnest. We often find that gradual separations are most effectively trained with behavioral medications on-board, and let us know if you need help trouble-shooting this part of the behavior modification training program.