

How to Avoid Separation Anxiety

Heidi Gehret

The three most important things to help your new greyhound feel secure and make a smooth transition from life on the track to a member of your pack:

Direction, Boundaries and Learning to be Alone

We all want to make our new greyhound feel welcome. We want to shower him with attention and affection. We want the neighbors to meet him. That makes perfect sense to human beings, but it has the opposite effect on dogs, especially retired racing greyhounds. In their life at the race track, greys are told what to do, how to do things, and when to do things. All that may sound wrong to us, but it makes racers feel secure. They don't have to think for themselves. As a caring greyhound adopter, it's natural for you to want to show your new greyhound that he no longer needs to earn his keep or run for his life. Now, he lives in a wonderful place with soft pillows and toys, great food and loving people.

Sure, all that'll make you feel great but, first, give your new grey what he wants and needs most: direction and boundaries, so he'll have a real sense of security. Toys, beds, treats, and pats will come later.

By following these simple steps you will avoid separation anxiety in your greyhound.

The First Day

Bring your new dog into the house on a leash and introduce him to his new surroundings. I start with the basic living area, the yard, and his new pack -- that's your family. You don't have to show your dog every room and closet in his new environment right away. It should be a quiet time. He can be overwhelmed, because he has never had that much space. By limiting his space, you have just set your dog's first boundary. Good job!

Settling Down

You might notice that your dog is having a hard time settling down. He might be wandering around, maybe panting, and probably anxious. All this is new to him. You're new to him. Even though you're dying to, this is not a time to console him like you would a child. Instead, ignore him for a few minutes, give him no attention, and act like he isn't there with you. Let him take it all in, and he should soon start to feel better.

If he doesn't settle down on his own, he is asking for direction. He doesn't know what is expected of him and is feeling anxious. This is the time to get his leash and put it on him. Remember -- don't pet him, just put the leash on and sit on your sofa. He will most likely stand in front of you and try to get your affection. Fight the temptation. Don't do it! Totally ignore him and wait. No talking, no touching. Wait for it...he will lie down. Good!!! You just made him feel much better and secure. More important, you just sent him a message that you are the one who gives him direction!

You should continue this exercise as many times as it takes for him to learn that he should relax in his new environment. Always give him a limited amount of time to settle himself, if he can't, then it's time for you to help him settle himself by getting out the leash. After a while, it will take less and less time for him to settle down, and eventually he will learn to settle himself.

Crate Training

Your dog has spent most of his time in a crate at a racing kennel or on a training farm. I know -- awful, right? We want all retired racers to be able to lounge on a sofa all day and not be closed up in a crate...eventually and if that's what they want. Let's think about it from the dog's perspective.

Your dog liked his crate. Among 30 or 40 crates in the track kennel, he knew exactly where his was. In fact, he would come running in, joyfully, from his turn-out time and happily jump back in his crate. He lived in a very small world, and his crate was his home, and he liked it. Why? Because he felt secure. Security is his key to happiness. No one could touch him while he slept or try to share his space. As much as you want to give your new greyhound the run of your home, please consider the fact that by doing that too soon, you can be setting up your greyhound to fail.

One of the biggest mistakes adopters make is not crating their new dog until they go to work. Alone training should start the first day you welcome your new greyhound into your home. You must crate your dog on the first day while you are home. Combine crating while you're home, helping your dog to be calm and feel secure when he is hanging out in his new home is the key to helping him make a smooth transition.

You might consider crating him during your first dinner time. His crate should not be in the kitchen, but in a different room, to create some separation and help him learn to be alone.

Complaining In A Crate

A dog that's feeling overwhelmed by his new environment, new family, and new freedom, even in his crate will probably start to complain while your fixing your dinner. Expect it. No big deal. At the first sign of complaining, whether he barks or starts to whine, put down whatever your doing and walk to the room, make eye-contact, and say "hey", he will most likely stop crying because you're standing there. (You should not be standing right up close to the crate, instead stand at the doorway because you want him to know this is a correction, not a playful visit.)

But you're not done. You have to stand and wait for him to submit by turning his head away from you or by lying down. You don't have to do anything but stand in the doorway, make eye-contact, and wait. Say nothing more than the word "hey," and point your finger, look at him and wait. That's it. When you see his submission signal (and you will), turn and walk away. He'll most likely try again, so just follow the same steps, until you get what you want...calmness in his crate while you're separated!!!! Nice!

Night Time Bonding

It is natural for greyhounds to sleep with their pack. Now that you are your dog's pack, you should allow your dog to sleep in your room. However, don't let your dog sleep in your bed; instead have a comfy spot, a pillow or blanket, on the floor beside your bed for him to sleep on. Shut your bedroom door. He should not be able to roam freely around your house at night. He is used to small secure places and will be happy to sleep with you through the night.

Please don't crate your dog by himself at night, especially if you crate him while you work during the day; it can create anxiety. The dog will become insecure and feel removed from the pack. It isn't difficult to help your new greyhound learn that his new environment is a calm, secure, and loving place with rules and limits. Soon, he will feel secure in his new world. And, you will have a happy greyhound free of anxiety that will bring your family a lifetime of love!