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## Service Dog-Human Relationship: Do Disabled Individuals Experience Separation Anxiety When Separated from Their Service Dog?

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Service Dog-Human Relationship: Do Disabled Individuals Experience Separation Anxiety  
When Separated from Their Service Dog?

Loyola Marymount University

### Abstract

In this article the authors will investigate the relationship between dogs and their owners based on previous research done on attachment theory. This study will address the gap in research on separation anxiety in dog owners. An estimated 200 participants will complete a survey that was designed for the purpose of this study. This survey will ask questions regarding separation from their dog. Half of the participants will be pet dog owners and the other half will be service dog owners with a physical disability. It is expected that on average service dog owners will experience more separation anxiety than pet dog owners. These findings will suggest that the relationship between a service dog and its owner is more mutual than the relationship between a pet dog and its owner.

Keywords: attachment theory, separation anxiety, dogs, service dogs, companion animals, pet dogs, disability, attachment figures

### **Introduction**

Attachment relationships are important to humans in establishing a sense of security. These relationships begin to form at birth and continue to develop throughout life. In many relationships, an individual may rely on an attachment figure for safety and support. Bowlby (1982) presents four necessary components of attachment relationships: proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, and separation anxiety. According to Bowlby, proximity seeking refers to the desire to be physically or emotionally close to the attachment figure in an effort to receive comfort and support. An example of this is when children desire to be near their parent. Safe haven refers to the attachment figure's ability to be a source of physical or emotional security for the attached individual. Being a secure base provides the attached person with the confidence to physically or emotionally explore because they feel they have a safe place to return to after exploring. An individual may experience separation anxiety if they are potentially going to be or are actually separated from their attachment figure.

Strong attachment bonds can form not only between two humans, but also between a human and a dog (Mariti, Ricci, Zilocchi, & Gazzano, 2013; Kurdek, 2008; Beck & Madresh, 2008). All four of the necessary components of an attachment relationship have been observed in the relationship of a pet dog to their owner. Prato-Previde, Custance, Spiezio, & Sabatini (2003) found that dogs show signs of proximity seeking when separated from their owner. Gácsi, Maros, Sernkvist, Faragó, & Miklósi (2003) found that owners are a safe haven to their dog due to the fact that they serve as a buffer against emotional distress. Research done by Mariti et al., (2013) shows that dogs are more likely to explore when their owner is present, which strongly suggests

that the dog views their owner as a secure base. Mariti et al., (2013) also found that pet dogs may exhibit distress when their owner is absent, suggesting that the pet dog experiences separation anxiety.

Research has found three of the four necessary components of an attachment relationship in an owner's relationship to their dog. Humans with high levels of attachment to their dogs display an almost equivalent level of emotional closeness to their animal as to other human attachment figures, which indicates that dogs meet the characteristic of proximity seeking (Kurdek, 2008). In a follow up study, Kurdek (2009) found that when pet-owners experience emotional distress they are more likely to rely on their dogs than on their friends or family for emotional support, which suggests that owners view their dog as a safe haven. Kurdek's (2008) findings indicate that dogs supply their owners with unconditional and non-judgemental acceptance, love, and support which provides the owner with a secure place to return to after exploring. Separation anxiety is the necessary component of attachment bonds that researchers have yet to explore.

While dogs have been shown to exhibit separation anxiety when their owner is absent, there is a lack of evidence showing that humans experience separation anxiety when their dog is absent. In order for an attachment relationship to be completely mutual, both individuals would need to fulfill all four of the necessary components of an attachment relationship. When this requirement is met, both individuals are considered attachment figures for each other, as is often displayed in romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). While it seems clear that there is often a strong emotional bond between an owner and their pet dog, it is hard to distinguish

whether or not the owner views their dog as an attachment figure. Despite the fact that both dogs and humans look to each other for emotional support, the attachment may be more unidirectional because pet dogs do not supply physical support to the same extent that humans do (e.g. providing food, water, and shelter). In this regard, owners may be an attachment figure for the pet dog while the pet dog is not an attachment figure to the owner, similar to the parent-child relationship. A service dog that supplies their owner with a physical need is a potential exception to this idea.

Kwong & Bartholomew (2011) found that the attachment between humans and dogs can be especially strong when it comes to service dogs providing assistance to their owner, as their relationship is very much interdependent. The owner provides the dog with its basic needs and the dog enables the owner to function at a higher level and achieve a higher quality of life (Shintani et al., 2010). Based on this research, we suspect that the service dog and human will develop a much stronger attachment bond due to the fact that the dog is largely contributing to the owner's ability to function. Due to the strong, interdependent attachment bond, we believe that the owner will experience separation anxiety.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not the relationship between a service dog and their disabled owner is mutual by evaluating whether or not owners experience separation anxiety when away from their dog. Unlike the pet dog-human relationship, the service dog-human relationship requires that the service dog satisfies an owner's physical needs. We predict that a person with a disability will display separation anxiety when no longer in proximity to their service dog while a person with a pet dog will not.

We will evaluate separation anxiety by having both service dog owners and pet dog owners complete a survey regarding past experiences of separation from their dog. We will define separation anxiety as significant negative emotional responses caused by the separation of the dog and their owner. If a dog satisfies necessary service needs for its owner, we believe that the owner will become anxious when the dog is no longer available to fulfill the owner's needs. This research is necessary to better understand the relationship between owners and their dogs. Hopefully, it will provide more information regarding the extent to which a disabled individual relies on a service dog and how service dogs are a crucial part of their disabled owner's support system and quality of life. Highlighting the importance of service dogs could potentially aid in making them more accessible to those who need them and could help support the idea that service dogs should be allowed in all establishments.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

We plan to recruit at least 200 participants for this quasi-experimental study by using SurveyMonkey. Half of the participants will be the owner of a pet dog that has no certifications. The other half of the participants will be physically disabled and utilize an officially recognized service dog. The "SurveyMonkey Audience" function allows us to send out our survey to a specific population. Due to their large and diverse respondent database, we would be able to reach out to disabled individuals without violating their medical privacy. We plan to survey both males and females between the ages of 18-45. We chose to limit the age range as a way to control for the variability that arises as the age range widens. For the participants with a physical

disability, we have chosen to survey individuals who have a physical disability (e.g., blindness, seizures, and diabetes) to limit the variability of disabilities we are looking at. While we recognize that many individuals with disabilities have emotional support dogs, we will not be including emotional support dogs. Emotional support dogs can be easily registered online and do not require the same training as legally recognized service dogs. In order to meet our inclusion criteria, participants need to have lived with their pet or service dog for at least 1 year to ensure that they are accustomed to life with their dog and are likely to have developed a strong relationship. Participants will only be included if they live on their own (with the exception of their 1 dog) in an effort to remove the confounding variable of extra support that is not provided by their dog. They will not be included if they have more than 1 dog.

### **Procedure**

We will have the participants complete a consent form regarding participation in the study. Participants will then be directed to a 2 part survey. The first section of the survey will gather demographic data so that we are able to account for sex, race, age, if the human owns more than 1 dog, and how long the dog and human have lived together. If they have a disability, we will ask them to specify the type of disability, severity of disability, whether or not the participant was born with their physical disability, and the amount of time that has passed since becoming physically disabled. The second section will contain eleven questions formulated specifically for our study that will be broken up into 3 categories. The first category will gather information regarding the longest separation between the owner and their dog. The second category will evaluate levels of separation anxiety during the longest separation between the owner and their

dog. The third category will test for separation anxiety disorder. The data we receive will be anonymous so that there is no way to link the information to a specific individual. After the individual has completed the survey there will be a thank you page which lists our contact information in case they would like to reach out.

## **Measures**

### Separation Experience

The first category of questions on the survey will ask the participant about their longest separation from their dog. We will ask them what the longest amount of time they have been separated from their dog was, whether or not the separation was expected, how supported they felt by others during the separation from their dog, and how far away (in miles) the participant was from their dog.

### Separation Anxiety

The next category of questions on the survey will measure separation anxiety during the longest separation (e.g., “I was fearful when separated from my dog”, “I was anxious when separated from my dog”, “I found myself thinking about my dog during the separation”, “I felt relieved when reunited with my dog”). We will use a five point Likert scale to measure separation anxiety associated with their experience.

### Separation Anxiety Disorder

The last category of questions on the survey will check to see if the participant is suffering from separation anxiety disorder (e.g., “I often fear being separated from my dog”, “I am fearful of being permanently separated (e.g., death of dog) from my dog”, “I am anxious that I will be

permanently separated (e.g., death of dog) from my dog”). We will use a five point Likert scale to measure separation anxiety disorder. We have decided to include these questions so that when analyzing our data we are able to account for individuals who might have this disorder.

### **Discussion**

The goal of our study is to explore the differences between the pet dog-human relationship and the service dog-human relationship. Specifically, we aim to find out whether or not humans experience separation anxiety in both of these relationships. Compared with owners of pet dogs, we suspect individuals who own service dogs will experience more separation anxiety when away from their dog. This finding would suggest that the relationship between an owner and their pet dog is not as mutual as the relationship between an owner and their service dog. We predict that unexpected separation from the dog will induce stronger separation anxiety than expected separations, as the duration of the separation was undefined when it began and this uncertainty is likely to increase the levels of anxiety. We also expect that the longer and further away the owner was from their dog, the stronger their separation anxiety will be. We also think that other forms of support during the separation will affect the disabled owner’s emotional response to the situation. Other forms of support which help fulfill needs could potentially reduce the amount of anxiety the service dog owner feels when away from their dog. We expect this effect to become more evident with increasing strength of the other support forms.

### **Implications**

Individuals with a disability experiencing separation anxiety when apart from their service dog means that service dogs meet the fourth necessary component to be considered an

attachment figure. This suggests that there is a strong and mutual attachment bond between the two parties. Hopefully, our findings will further demonstrate the importance of service dogs and how it is necessary for disabled individuals to have access to service dogs if they so choose. Additionally, certain business owners and countries refuse to serve disabled individuals because they do not allow service dogs in their establishment. Our research suggests that it would be quite beneficial for disabled individuals if service dogs were allowed in all establishments.

#### Limitations

One limitation of our study is that we are unable to evaluate separation anxiety during or immediately after separation. Our study is retrospective and the amount of time that has passed since the separation experience will not be standard between all individuals. Participants may not accurately recall events that occurred a significant amount of time before the study is conducted. The second limitation of our study is that we will only look at the longest separation experience. It is possible that the longest separation experience is not going to give us a full picture of how the individual reacts to separation from their dog. In some cases, individuals may have experienced a shorter separation that led to greater separation anxiety than the separation experience they referenced while answering the questions in the survey. Our third limitation is that our study was quasi-experimental because we were unable to manipulate separation or control for various confounds. We could not find an ethical way to separate the owner from their dog for a long period of time, so we hope that future studies are able to create an experiment in which they are able to manipulate the separation of the dog and human in an ethical way. Another potential limitation is the response rate. If we are unable to recruit an ample number of

participants, then there will not be sufficient data to provide reliable insight to the nature of the relationship between an owner and their dog.

#### Future Directions

Our findings show that there is an association between providing for a physical need and attachment relationships. It would be helpful if future research could look at why exactly individuals with a disability experience separation anxiety. Future research should look at whether the disabled individual is truly experiencing separation anxiety because their attachment figure, the service dog, is absent or because the service dog is not available to fulfill a physical need. It is also important that future studies find a way to ethically explore our research question using an experimental study. We believe that a proper yet ethical manipulation of the variables will yield more reliable results.

#### Conclusion

This article is one of the first to look at separation anxiety in disabled individuals' relationship with their service dog. We hope researchers will continue to look at the service dog-human relationship and how it relates to attachment theory. Bowlby only intended to apply attachment theory to children and parents, but it was later expanded to romantic relationships by Hazan and Shaver. Our research indicates that attachment bonds can also develop between humans and animals, further expanding the concept of attachment relationships. There has been some research done on the pet dog-human relationship, but there is still a large lack of research on dog owners experiencing separation anxiety when away from their dog. Our study begins

to unpack the relationship between a service dog and their disabled owner. This article suggests that there is a mutual bond between disabled owners and their service dogs due to the fact that disabled owners do experience separation anxiety when apart from their dog. We hope future research continues to explore the complexity of the service dog-disabled owner relationship.

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