

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 001 Transcript – How to Act When the Separation Anxiety Bombshell Drops

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-01/>

Well, hello there and welcome to the very first episode of the Fixing Separation Anxiety podcast. So this week, I'm going to talk to you about light bulb moment. What do I mean by that? Well, those are the moments where you just know, you just suddenly realize, or you have your worst suspicions confirmed that your dog has separation anxiety. And I think we've all had those moments.

I recently posted this question in my Facebook group. If you haven't joined that Facebook group, I really encourage you to do so because it's full of resources and tips from other pet parents, trainers, and people just going through what you're going through. So the address for that is www.subthresholdtraining.com/Facebook.

Okay, those light bulb moments. I posted this question recently in the group, and it was really fascinating to see how many different types of light bulb moments there were. For me, it was the neighbor scenario, and I think lots of you resonated with that. What do I mean by that? That moment when you get a note under the door or maybe you get a message from your landlord, or maybe it's just a quiet word. It would be nice if it was just a quiet word from your neighbor. Usually it's a note or an email or something from a third party telling you that your dog's been barking all day.

Now, I know when that happened to me, it was definitely a light bulb moment of, yeah, this is as bad as I thought it might be. This is my dog, Percy. He wasn't barking all day, by the way. He was just barking for as long as we go out. That sounds awful, saying that. Now, as most of you know who work with me, or if you work with separation anxiety, you'll know that leaving them to bark out is absolutely not what we do. But there's me with a dog who is barking for as long as we leave him. Now, this was way back when I wasn't a trainer at this stage. Percy was a baby and very new to the household. My other dog, India, was absolutely fine when we left.

So, when my neighbor told me that my dog was barking, first off, I knew it was Percy. I didn't think it was India. I suspected that there was something going on with him. But then I was like, well, if it's that bad, if the neighbors are that concerned about it, then I have got a really big issue. So for me, that light bulb moment was confirming my worst fears, if you like. And I saw that when I posted on the group. I saw that lots of you who said the same thing. It was not that you didn't have your suspicions about separation anxiety, but you're kind of waiting for that one thing to really, really nail it and say, yep, this is definitely separation anxiety. You were hoping I guess it would go away, or it wasn't what you suspected it was. You were hoping it would all just be fine.

People described coming back to a house that's destroyed, but beyond kind of normal dog chewing stuff. When separation anxiety dogs destroy, it's destruction with serious intent. So people would come back to that. Other things people said on the post was coming back to their house having been soiled and just not understanding it. Because actually, usually what happens with a dog who has separation anxiety if they're going to soil, and they usually house train the rest of the time. So light bulb moment for people coming back saying, well, what the heck is going on? Why is this happening while I'm out of the house? Other people describe less of an instantaneous, oh, my goodness, I never knew this was going on moment, but more of a yeah, I had been wondering if there was something awry, but now that I see that she's hurt herself, she's ripped her nails in her teeth while I've been out, I know this isn't normal dog stuff. So as separation anxiety owners, we all had those moments where there's really no going back at that point, you know, your dog has separation anxiety, you know it's not normal, and it's time to do something about it.

Way back when, like I said, I wasn't a trainer. I had a dog with separation anxiety and luckily, a dog who was perfectly fine on her own. But what was I supposed to do? Well, being the type that I am, I decided to do as much research as possible. The first idea that I came across, it was all down to me not showing leadership that my dog Percy considered me to be his baby. I know. Follow me on this one. Follow me on this one. I bought into it a few years ago. Don't laugh at me. So naturally, if he sees me as his baby, all I need to do is show him that I'm not his baby. Okay, how do I do that then? Well, the theory went I need to do things like go out of the door first, eat before him. I mean, seriously, I had to get a plate with food and do this thing where I ate, and then he watched me and then I could eat. Yeah. No, seriously, this was a fix for separation anxiety. Trust me. And then I had to do the ignoring thing. Now, any of you who've tried to ignore your dog when you come in or even just when you move around the house, how difficult is that with most separation anxiety dogs, they don't just want your company, they don't just want your attention. As Dr. Karen Overall says, they need your attention. They are so desperate to have some contact with you that you try ignoring them. Give it a go. Some dogs will be okay with it. But I tell you what, a lot of separation anxiety dogs, if you try and ignore them, it just ain't happening. So anyway, I tried all of that. Needless to say, it didn't make a shot of difference. Not one bit of difference did any of that make. That immediately said to me, oh, it can't be that he thinks I'm his baby. That just doesn't add up. So I threw that theory out of the window, and then off I went and tried to look into it, what I came across and how I knew that that was the right method to use. But yeah, light bulb moments, the point at which there's no going back, you know, your dog's got separation anxiety and you have to do something to fix it. The other side to light bulb moments is not just that logical, okay, I've got this problem I need to resolve it. It's the almost a punch in the stomach. I can feel my stomach knotting up at that emotion, at going back to that point where I just had this realization that this dog was in a really bad place. So I still feel tension from that light bulb moment, and I'm sure many of you have been through that too. It's tough, right? You thought you'd got a normal dog. You have this dog with something unbelievably, off the charts, abnormal going on.

So, what is separation anxiety? Let's do a quick reminder. So as we're going through this podcast, we're on the same page. Remember that it's a panic disorder. It's really important to

keep that in mind when you're thinking about separation anxiety. It's a phobia. So your dog has this morbid fear of being on his own when you go out of the house. For the vast majority of dogs, separation anxiety means they get really upset when they're on their own. But as long as a human is with them, then they're fine. And actually, some dogs who get anxious on their own can even be comforted by another, let's call it creature, another companion in the house. Sometimes a dog, sometimes a cat, and that's quite rare.

Normally what happens with separation anxiety dogs is they need another human in the house. Luckily, it doesn't have to be you and it doesn't have to be in the house. Most separation anxiety dogs do really well in daycare or with a dog sitter. So that separation anxiety. Your dog has this fear of being on his own. If you look at the definition of a phobia in a human, you'll often hear the words irrational. So phobias are described as irrational fears. So if you're frightened of spiders, what are you really frightened of? In most countries of the world, there aren't many spiders that will kill you. And huge apologies to anybody who doesn't like spiders and can't even bear me talking about them. At least I'm not going to put a picture up, but you'll hear phobias described as irrational with a dog, I think we can't say it's irrational. We can't say, oh, don't be so silly as far as we know. Oh, and by the way, if you've got a phobia of spiders, I wouldn't tell you that silly either.

Phobias are very, very real. So I don't like the term irrational. And if we use a term irrational fear for a dog, well, how do we know that our dogs don't think the world is about to end because you stepped outside the door? It could be totally real for them. Now there are some dogs who are only okay with one person or maybe one or two people. They can't be comforted at home by just anybody. It has to be the owner or it has to be the owner, the family. Luckily there aren't as many dogs who fall into that category, but there are some. So that's separation anxiety you've got to keep in mind when you go out, the stuff that your dog gets up to is a result of panic, fear, anxiety, stress, whatever it is not, definitely not your dog being bad. We used to think that. We used to think that when you went out and your dog got up to stuff, it was all about your dog being mad at you for going out with separation anxiety dogs, that is not the case. They are really, really upset that you've gone out. I mean troubled, I mean, beyond just fed up. They are, like I say, in a panic.

So how many dogs get separation anxiety? Well, it's depending on which research you look at. It's actually quite a large number. Some studies would say that up to one in five dogs get separation anxiety. That's a heck of a lot of dogs. Funnily enough though, I don't know about you, but when my dog had separation anxiety, I rarely knew anybody. In fact, I don't think I knew anybody at all whose dog had separation anxiety. That's one of the reasons why I created the Facebook group, because I thought, well, I know there's a ton of owners out there, I work with many of them, but let's connect people so that we don't all feel like we're isolated. It's an isolating enough condition as it is, so let's not feel even more isolated.

So that's what separation anxiety is. We know lots of dogs get it. We're not entirely sure why some dogs get it and others don't. Hopefully we will get to know more about that. And next week I'll be talking about what we currently do know about causes of separation anxiety and some of

the myths around what absolutely doesn't cause it. If you haven't had that light bulb moment and you haven't had it confirmed, that your dog has separation anxiety, how do you know? How do you know that what's going on when you're out is anxiety, fear and panic? Or how do you know if it's just normal dog stuff? Because you got to remember that lots of dogs will get up to stuff, let's say when you're gone, and we call that separation related behaviors, but it doesn't mean to say that your dog is in a panic.

Let's take an example. If you've got an eight-month-old working line gun dog who gets 20 minutes off leash exercise a day, and you come home and you find that your sofa and your kitchen cabinets are pretty much toast, there's a good chance that that dog just needs more exercise and more stimulation. Because eight-month-old field line working dogs need a ton of stimulation. Stuff that happens when you're out doesn't have to be anxiety. So what are you looking for? How do you know? Firstly, there's excessive vocalization, and that can be howling. It can be whining, barking, crying. It doesn't have to be your dog doing that really sad plaintiff cry that you might hear. Some dogs will just do their normal bark, or maybe their normal bark, but on steroids. So it doesn't have to be a cry, it doesn't have to be a heart howl, though those definitely can be signs. The key about the vocalization is the word excessive.

Now, obviously, excessive is relative, but you're looking for a dog that's really persistent with the vocalization, they just don't give up. It really doesn't matter how long you're gone for, they will keep going and going and going. And with the destruction, that's another key sign. So we talked about the eight month old young dog who's just bored and destroys if you come back to destruction, but you can't put it down to boredom, you want to also look for where is the dog destroying? So are you seeing signs of destruction around a doorframe or maybe around a window or maybe the door itself? So does it look like your dog has been trying to dig a way out? That is such a telltale sign. So destruction that takes place in different parts of the house could well still be anxiety, but destruction that takes place around entryways is a really classic sign of separation anxiety.

And the final big one that we look for is when your dog soils. So he pees or he poos in the house, but he's not doing that any other time. He only does it when you go out. One thing to be careful of here is it's human nature. If your dog has a house training slip up and you scold them, lots of people do, and it can be an instinctive response. If you do that, your dog can start to think it's not really very cool to go in front of her because she shouts at me. So what I'm going to do is I'm going to make sure that she's not around and then I'm going to go. So they'll go in the house, but they'll just check that you're not around. So they might wait until you've gone out or they might sneak off to other parts of the house. If you think your dog's only soiling when you're out, could it be that maybe once or twice they've been scolded for it and now they're doing a sneaky thing of trying to do it when you're not around so they don't get into trouble? Remember, dogs don't do motivation like we do. They aren't as sinister in their motives as we are. They just think, is it safe? Is it dangerous? Does it work for me? Does it not work for me? So with this house training issue, if they're worried about going when you're around, either on a walk or in the garden or in the house, then they'll wait till you're not around. So just have a check on that. But those are the three big signs that we see in separation anxiety, dogs that we don't tend to

see as often in other dogs who are home alone. It's not that home alone dogs who aren't anxious don't do those three biggies, it's just that we see them way more often in separation anxiety dogs.

So quick recap, excessive vocalization destruction, particularly if it looks like your dog's trying to dig its way out, and soiling especially. And primarily if your dog is house drained all of the rest of the time, your dog doesn't have to display all three of these symptoms. It could just be one or it may be none of these. And your dog's separation anxiety may present differently. Other things that you might see so those are the three big ones, but other things you might see are pools of drool when you come home, or if you've got a long-haired dog, a face that's really, really wet. Any damage to your dog's nails or teeth? Does it look like they've hurt themselves trying to either escape through a doorway or perhaps through a wall? Because that seems more logical to them. And also, if you are setting up a camera, I'll come on to that in a second, you'll see things like excessive vigilance, you'll see moving around, pacing, not being able to rest. There are a ton of signs that we can see that are more subtle than the big three. So we often look for those other signs in association with the big three to really confirm it. And I mentioned camera. So if you haven't had that light bulb moment, if you haven't heard anybody tell you your dog's barking all day, definitely, definitely set up a video camera on your dog if you haven't done already. That's what trainers do. If you come to me and you say, I need to find out if it's separation anxiety and I want to fix it, if it is the very first thing we'll do together is set up a camera on your dog, observe your dog and work out what's going on. When you're out, there's no way of knowing what's going on unless you have that camera running. And when I work with pet parents, I find the first time they set up the camera, they see stuff that they never imagined going on. And in my Facebook group, I see comments from people who say, we didn't think she had anxiety for a year, she seemed fine. And then when we set the camera up, we could see that she wasn't fine.

So even if dogs aren't displaying those three big signs, there may be other things going on. Or you may live in a house where barking doesn't matter and you might not get anybody telling you. So do set up a camera, it can make all of the difference. What can you do if you've had that light bulb moment you've worked out its separation anxiety? Well, back in the day, when I was trying to solve this problem, like I said, I tried the method of showing him I was the leader. And by the way, your dog absolutely knows that you're a leader. You control everything in your dog's life. You pay the mortgage, for goodness sake. You decide when he eats, what he eats, when he goes out, where he plays, who he plays with, who can come and approach him, which bed he gets. So you definitely don't need to show him that you're leader. He knows. He knows who's in charge. Doing all of that stuff ain't going to make a bit of difference to separation anxiety, as I found out.

I looked into so many different things trying to help Percy. I looked at therapies like, the thundershirt, like a diffuser that gave off pheromones. I tried things like essential oils, I tried homeopathic remedies. Oh, my goodness, I tried so many things. I tried natural chews, I tried calming tablets, anything, everything. Nothing worked. Not a single thing made any difference at

all. It became an incredibly stressful situation. And looking back, it seems so incredible that it was that hard to find good information.

I think now the problem with separation anxiety is there's so much advice, you just don't know where to start. Luckily, eventually, and it does feel like luck when I look back on it, I did stumble across the method that I now teach and the method that has been proven to be the most successful method for training and treating separation anxiety. It's the same method, basically, that we use to treat human phobias. It's called gradual exposure. And what we do with a dog is we gradually get him used to being on his own, but in tiny steps that he can cope with. That's the thing that works. It's been proven time and time and time again. Research studies show that it works. We've got tons of dogs who've gone through the process and have come out the other side happy home alone. If you've ever tried doing that and decided it didn't work, well, there are certain things that you need to do that make it work.

First off, you have to go at the dog's pace and that can be so slow. Oh my goodness. But you've got to remember that we're not teaching a dog to sit. We're changing his emotion. We're helping him get over an emotional trauma. There is no set time to how long it takes to get over that emotional trauma. And we all know, don't we, that those things don't rectify themselves quickly. You don't get over a really big emotional trauma in a week. It takes much longer. That's why Desensitization, which is the fancy name for gradual exposure, that's why the training can seem like it's not working because it takes a long time. And while we're training, we have to keep our dogs comfortable so they have to be happy with every single alone time. So every single time you go out, they have to be, okay, we can't leave them for longer than they are comfortable with. And that's the other big pitfall and the other mistake that we all make. I know I did. When we're doing this training, we do the training, we're keeping him nice and comfortable. We're doing very short departures and then on another day we'll go and leave them and we leave them for longer than they can cope with because we've got to go to work or we have an appointment to go to. But here's the thing. The gradual exposure that Desensitization training gives a message that being on your own is safe. Here's a tiny amount of being on your own. Can you handle that? Oh, yeah, I'm great, says the dog. If we then mix the message and leave them for way longer than they can cope with, the dog is not going to learn. He's not going to learn that being on his own is safe. Which of course leaves us with a huge problem. How can we possibly get him over separation anxiety when we just don't have any way of not leaving him for longer than he can cope with it's? Crazy trainer talk, right? To say, well, the way to get your dog over separation anxiety is not to leave him. But wait a minute. If you could not leave your dog, then separation anxiety wouldn't be a problem. But think of it like this. That whole concept of trying not to leave him for longer than he can cope with, that's temporary, okay, that's temporary while you train him to be safe on his own, to be happy on his own. Once you get him to a place where he's comfortable on his own, you can get your life back. You can stop using dog sitters and dog walkers and daycare and friends and family and anybody who will help. That stuff is temporary if you do the training, and if you don't leave him for longer than he can cope with. So it might seem ridiculous now, but if you can stick with those two rules of keeping him under a threshold, going at his pace, number one and number two, not ever leaving him for

longer than he can cope with while he's learning it safe, then this process works for the vast majority of dogs. So it's worth it.

The whole experience I had with Percy, and particularly the experience of not getting the information I needed, threw me into a world of evidence-based dog training that I absolutely lapped up. It just all started to make sense. When you unpick the evidence-based methods and understand how they relate to the way dogs and people learn, it all starts to piece together and make beautiful sense. In a way. I'm really glad Percy had separation anxiety. I'm really glad he's over it, but I'm really glad he had it, because if it hadn't been for his separation anxiety, I wouldn't have discovered these evidence-based dog training methods, I wouldn't have discovered the ones that worked and I wouldn't have got into dog training.

That's where I am now. So I got certified as a dog trainer, I threw myself into separation anxiety training, and my big mission is to make all of this information accessible for you so that you don't have to go through the confusion that I went through many years ago. But I also want to make sure you don't have too much information, because you could waste days, weeks, months on the Internet trying to find separation anxiety solutions and there's way too much out there.

During the course of these podcast episodes, I will be focusing on the training method that works. I'll be telling you about stuff that doesn't, and I'll be helping you focus on the things that are going to make the biggest difference to your dog and his separation anxiety. There is most definitely hope. You can help him feel happier at home. You can get your life back and you can get that precious freedom back that you think you've lost forever. It's not an easy journey, but it is going to be rewarding. And seeing him flourish and you getting back that spontaneity, it's just going to be the best.

So if you want some tips on training, I've done a one page summary about how Desensitization training works and you can get that by visiting my website, [www.subthresholdtraining.com/Episode one](http://www.subthresholdtraining.com/Episode%20one). That's where you'll find the download. All right, thank you for joining me this week. It's been wonderful having you listening and I can't wait to see you online soon. Bye for now.