

## Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

### Episode 002 Transcript – Why You Didn't Actually Cause Your Dog's Separation Anxiety

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-02/>

Well, hello there, and welcome to the second episode of the separation anxiety podcast. I'm your host, Julie Naismith. In today's episode, we're going to be talking about a question that comes up all the time. Tell me if you haven't heard this one. So did you cause your dog separation anxiety? Now, be honest. Have you been told that? Have you thought it? I bet you have. Because if you haven't heard that and if you haven't thought that, you're just about the only separation anxiety pet parent I've ever come across who hasn't thought that. But I'm here today to tell you your dog separation anxiety is not down to you. So it's time to stop feeling guilty and start taking action.

But where does all this stuff come from? This notion that we as separation anxiety pet parents are causing this issue in our dog is definitely not backed by any strong evidence. There's no strong research which says, oh, yep, it's absolutely something you as an owner do. And also, if you've ever had or if you've currently got a non-anxious dog, do you do anything different with a non-anxious dog? I bet you don't. And I bet the stuff you do, like letting that dog, the non-anxious dog, sleep on the bed, isn't causing your dog to freak out when you leave. It's just something about those separation anxiety dogs. So time to forgive yourself and let go of this notion that it's all your fault.

The thing is, with separation anxiety, most of the time, the answer to what caused it is, well, nobody really knows. A big part of it could well be genetic. We don't have the research on that yet. I hope one day we will. And there's certainly leaders in the field of veterinary behavior science who think that there's a genetic component to separation anxiety. One day. Hopefully, there will be research into the genes that may or may not cause this. But my gut tells me there probably is a genetic component. Why do I say that? I don't always like going on gut when there's research that can help us. And as most of you know, I'm big into evidence and science-based dog training. But here's why I think there could be a big genetic component.

First off, we know that with things like stranger fear and noise phobia, noise phobia in particular has a known genetic component. And with things like stranger fear, well, dogs guarding dogs, herding dogs, dogs who are there to protect us are often bred selectively to be wary of strangers. So we know there's a genetic component there, so why not separation anxiety? If we can see all of these things popping up as a result of genetics. Why couldn't it be possible that separation anxiety is also something that is caused by genetics? Also remember that we have, over the years, bred dogs to be friendly towards us, notwithstanding the guarding dogs who we like to breed for standoffishness. But for the most part, domesticated dogs are bred to be friendly towards us. So there's a genetic component too. I'm sure one day some research will

crop up which says there is almost no doubt that part of the cause of separation anxiety is something that happens way, way back in the dog's genes.

Another thing that makes me think could this be genetic is the number of young dogs to be prone to it. So if separation anxiety is just all about life experience, why are we seeing so many young dogs who clearly are exhibiting signs of discomfort, fear, panic at being left alone? So in my Facebook group, which at the time of this episode has two and a half thousand people in it, around 30% of people in that group, 30% of the people whose dogs have separation anxiety have dogs who are under one year. Now, fear is really easy to come by, so there's no reason why dogs who had no predisposition, so no genetic disposition to a particular fear couldn't develop it that quickly. I.e. Couldn't get it under in under a year. But 30% is a lot. Certainly in the past we didn't think that puppies had separation anxiety. We didn't think that puppies could get separation anxiety. We just thought the stuff that went on when puppies were left alone was normal puppy stuff. But now we know we're pretty certain that puppies do get it. So if puppies get it, where has it come from? Is it early life experience or is it genes? Like I said, one day I hope we'll know. But in the meantime, what do we know for sure about this condition?

Well, there's a fabulous piece of research and it's open source, so you can look at it. And I've linked to it in the show notes. It's a study of studies that was done in 2014. A study of studies, a really comprehensive piece of research that takes all of the research on a topic or a very broad range of research on a topic and pulls it together. So they kind of do all the hard work for us. That study of studies concluded that the key factors that affect the likelihood of separation anxiety are mixed and inconclusive. There could be a number of factors that contribute, but none of them really stood out as being definitive. So when you read the study, you don't go, oh right, so that's why dogs get separation anxiety. But let me just run through some of the things and some of the trends that they saw in this study of studies.

So first of all, and I've seen this in the data from my clients and from the several thousand people who complete the questions when they join my group. Male dogs are more likely to have separation anxiety problems than female dogs. Not every study showed this, but more studies than not showed this. So in the population that I look at, so my separation anxiety group and my client list, about 60% of the dogs are male and 40% are female. So it's a reasonable difference. And most of the studies that are in this study of studies seem to show the same thing too. I think one or two studies showed there was no difference. But interestingly, I don't think there's a study which says it's more females than male, so seems to be something about males. We don't know why I think that's going to be your question or we don't know. Other things that this fantastic study of studies came up with is that separation from the litter. So taking a puppy away at a very young age could be problematic and could be something that brings about separation anxiety, especially in younger dogs. And in the study they looked in particular at dogs who came from pet shops or online. So these were dogs that would be taken away, puppies taken away very young, ages four or five weeks, something like that, and then sold on online or through pet shops. So one thing I always say is if you don't want to get a puppy with separation anxiety, definitely avoid online shops and pet shops.

And then another thing kind of linked to that whole puppyhood factor is experience outside the home. We all know how important socialization is but it seems to play a part in separation anxiety too, though interestingly, in this study of studies they looked at experience outside the home for puppies aged five to ten months. Now most dog trainers will tell you that we now look at a socialization period of up to twelve weeks and at that point we see the socialization window closing. But what the studies in separation anxiety is showing is that there's still a period of age between, say, five to ten months, where if we give our dogs comfortable, happy, non-fearful exposures to the outside world, and we show them how to be alone in that time period of five to ten months, we're less likely to trigger separation anxiety.

Another factor that they saw was late age adoption. So that would be dogs adopted in adulthood. So not necessarily puppies, but mature dogs adopted into a new household later in their lives. There were some factors around dogs coming from animal shelters or those were found as strays. Now my hypothesis on that is that people don't always give the reason why they're surrendering dogs and I find that in the shelter that I volunteer at we don't always know the full history. Why is that? Well sometimes people don't know, so they're not being dishonest. But sometimes, and you can totally understand why sometimes people feel really uncomfortable disclosing the full history because they're worried that their dog isn't going to be adopted. And most people, when they surrender a dog, their aim is for that dog to be adopted out again. So if they disclose something like separation anxiety, which there's a view, that is a very difficult condition to fix. Not true, by the way. But you can see why some owners are reluctant to disclose that when they're surrendering.

So does being in a shelter cause separation anxiety or did the dog have it before they came in? Hard to tell if we're not getting full disclosure on the dog's condition when they enter the shelter. When I looked at the data, based on the questions that I asked people entering my group, about 40% of people said they'd got their dog from a breeder. So getting your dog from a breeder isn't even a guarantee that you're not going to have a dog with separation anxiety. A few other things from this fabulous paper. Dogs who live in apartments are a bit more prone. Now I wonder and I postulate, is that actually because barking dogs are more likely to be flagged up in apartments? I think so. I think that it's much harder to have a dog who barks all day if you've got neighbors are on every single wall. And another factor that came out from the studies is that homes without children, that's without human children, not without fur babies are also at higher risk or more likely to have dogs with separation anxiety. I wonder is that is it caused or is it effects? But in a lot of homes with children, parents are coming home, picking up kids from school, they're not necessarily out of the house for 12 hours a day. So I think that could be a factor there too.

So it's a fascinating piece of research and I highly recommend it if you want to dig it out. Links in the Show Notes Sergeants in 2014 and just continuing on with this theme of the big factors in separation anxiety triggers, two things we are really quite clear on that are likely to exacerbate or bring on separation anxiety for the first time. The first one is a change in household circumstances. So that could be change in the family makeup. It could be even something like losing a pet, losing another pet. So maybe you had two dogs in the house and you lost one or even a cat. We've seen that too. So changes in the household circumstances can be a really big

trigger for separation anxiety. We often see it coming on in that situation or getting worse if the dog already has it.

And the other one, and this is probably really obvious, but moving home so moving home can have a massive effect on separation anxiety again, either making it worse or bringing it on in the first place. It's really helpful to know that changes in the household or moving home can affect your dog's separation anxiety because at least you're prepared for it. But what are you going to do? You're not going to stay in the same house forever. Although my husband has said to us that we are not moving because we are not going through separation anxiety again with Percy. But what are you going to do, really? You're not going to stay in the same house or not split up with your partner just because you're worried about your dog separation anxiety. You might try, but at the end of the day, stuff is going to happen.

There are some things that weren't covered in the study in great detail, I think really have an impact on separation anxiety because I see it time and time again. The first falls into kind of a heading of dog having a really bad experience while he's home alone. And the classic one, there is a thunderstorm. So the dog is fine up to a point, then all of a sudden it could be one season or it could be just a one off thunderstorm and your dog really goes into a panic. Now, often that's because the dog is noise phobic anyway, or the noise phobia was triggered by a particularly bad storm season. But we often see a dog who was fine at home alone all of a sudden starting to freak out because he started to get frightened or phobic of noise. So you've now got noise phobia and this phobia of being alone. And the other thing that can happen is your dog can have bad experiences at home if you're using aversives to control his home alone behavior. And what do I mean by that? Usually bark collar. So a bark collar is an electric shock device that frightens your dog basically into not barking. So if you've tried to use one of those at home and don't worry if you have, don't feel bad. The manufacturers of these things, honestly, the marketing behind them, that they just give your dog a static shock. Oh my goodness, by the way, that's not true. These things only work because they hurt. So if like loads of people, you've been taken in by the marketing, don't feel bad because it's very slick and they are very convincing. But unfortunately, if you use that to control barking, I don't know, say your dog is a barker at stuff in the street, you're out all day and you are getting complaints from the neighbors, not because your dog's anxious, but he's just doing his guard doggy stuff. So you stick a bark collar on him. Now, what's happened is every time you go out, he has this electric shock device on him and he hates it. He freaks at it over time. Can you see what's going to happen? You get ready to go out and he remembers you only put it on him when you go out. So he's petrified of you leaving because this thing hurts, and he only has it on him if you leave him home alone. Dogs learn by association, so really quickly he's associating. Being at home with pain, bad experiences while home alone can definitely contribute or trigger separation anxiety.

And one thing I mentioned earlier about changes in the household. Now, we used to think that a second dog was not the answer to separation anxiety. And I still think that for the most part. Why? Because we see it time and time again. People get a second dog thinking that it's going to fix separation anxiety, and it doesn't. And then sometimes you end up with double the trouble. But when dogs have lost a companion, and that losing of a companion dog has triggered their

anxiety, that's when, that's when a second dog can be the thing to do. Getting a second dog is definitely not a fix for all separation anxiety dogs. However, we can see anxiety being triggered when your dog loses a pal, when all of a sudden they're the only dog at home. If that's the case, you may well be a candidate for getting a second dog. Everybody else just switch off here, just tune out. Because what I don't want is everybody rushing out and getting a second dog thinking it'll fix separation anxiety. The vast majority of instances it doesn't. But if your dog lost a companion dog, it might be something to think about.

All right, I've talked a lot about what does cause separation anxiety or what triggers it, and hopefully I've made you feel better about the fact that it wasn't you. So now let's talk a bit more about that and let's really dive into what doesn't cause separation anxiety. First off, the biggie, having your dog sleep on your bed does not cause separation anxiety. Have a look at the research again, go back to the paper I've linked in the show notes because there's a ton of studies in there that looked at this very issue, and I think only one, and that might have been a study of perhaps 20 dogs, maybe even twelve dogs. Only one suggested there could be a link between letting your dog sleep on the bed and separation anxiety. So honestly, no, letting your dog sleep on the bed is not why he freaks out when you go out of the house. If you've had a, quote, normal dog who's fine when you go, you'll know, you can let them sleep on the bed. And honestly, you could walk out of the house and they probably wouldn't leave the bed and could stay there for a week if you fed them and watered them. So, yeah, no, it really isn't the case that letting your dog sleep on the bed is why your dog separate anxiety was triggered.

Another thing that definitely doesn't cause it is letting them hang out with you when you're at home. Dogs who follow you around the home, velcro dogs are very common, and, in fact, lots of non-anxious dogs can be velcro dogs. If you think about it, we're the source of all things fun and amazing to dogs. We make good stuff happen, like walks and food and treats and toys. So it's no wonder that dogs are really interested in what we're doing. They like to follow us around, because you never know. We might be heading to the cookie jar. We might be heading to the cupboard where the treats live or might be guessing the toys out. So, velcro dogs and the research supports this are just as common amongst non-anxious dogs as anxious dogs. Both non-anxious and anxious dogs can follow their owner.

One of my dogs, Tex, is one of these velcro dogs. Not with me, by the way, with my husband. Why? Well, Texas is a quarter lab, but I always joke that when it comes to food, he's 100% lab, and my husband is the feeder. So Tex knows every move that my husband makes. He follows him like a hawk, and he will follow him around the house, because you never know. My husband might be about to produce a food bowl. And Texas is the least velcro dog you can imagine when it comes to leaving. He's just like, are you going? Are you do you leave me any food? All right, maybe see you later. So, yeah, don't think that letting them have attention or hang out with you in the house is a cause for concern. It's not why your dog's got separation anxiety. Other things that fall into the doesn't cause it bracket, rewards-based training.

Now, I've heard this from trainers who use punishment, fear, and force to train dogs. That all this, quote I don't even know where this comes from. Soft training is causing problems with

dogs. They don't know boundaries. I tell you what. Rewards-based training is one of the most powerful way to establish boundaries with your dog. We use rewards-based training to teach them. We don't want them to jump up. We don't want them to steal things from counters, knock visitors over. We want them to be on a mat when stuff's going on in the house. We want them to walk nicely on leash. Rewards based training is incredibly powerful for that. It doesn't undermine the concept of boundaries in dogs at all. In fact, what it does is it confirms them. And it confirms them using the most powerful message, which is food. So don't buy into that.

Rewards-based training does not cause your dog's anxiety. Finally, in the what doesn't cause it bucket is not being alpha does not cause your dog is that a double negative? Yeah. Not being alpha does not cause your dog to have separation anxiety. Anyway, what I mean by that is forget the alpha myth. It's been totally debunked. Your dog knows 100% who's in charge in your house. You decide everything in your dog's life. You even make life or death decisions for your dog. He knows exactly who's in control. So you don't need to prove that you're the leader, you don't need to, quote, dominate him, forget all that stuff. None of that is a relevant anyway to your relationship with your dog and B isn't at all why your dog's got separation anxiety. So forget alpha, forget leadership nonsense, it's got nothing to do with your relationship with your dog. But here are things that can affect separation anxiety but luckily they're things you can work on.

So spending all your time with your dog one of the unfortunate outcomes of the way we train for separation anxiety is that you end up spending way more time with your dog than a normal owner and a normal dog would spend together. I hate that term normal, but a dog without anxiety, a dog without anxiety doesn't spend 24/7 with their owner. What happens with separation anxiety dogs is quite often because we can't leave them, we end up spending a disproportionate amount of time with them. So one thing I really like to encourage pet parents to do is even if you can suspend all absences and be with your dog the whole time, think about options like dog sitting and dog walking or even just getting a friend round to take your dog out when she goes to the dog park with her dogs. I don't want your dog to think that the only good things that happen in his life are as a result of you. Do you see what I mean? I want him to see that good things happen even when you're not involved. Otherwise we can create a bit too much of an overdependence.

Other things that might not help separation anxiety not getting a puppy gradually used to being on its own it's really important that we do teach puppies to be okay on their own. However, what I don't want you to do if you're thinking about getting another puppy, what I don't want you to do is just abandon your puppy in a crate for several hours and let them cry it out. We used to think that's what you did with puppies, but now we know not a good idea. So just gradually, gradually in the time from day one, from the very first day that you get your puppy, just show him that being on his own is fine. And actually sometimes it's amazing because you leave great things in his crate. So you'll start with a few minutes of him being alone and you'll build up very gradually. It's exactly the same principles as separate anxiety training. So just build up really gradually and get him comfortable on his own alone. Definitely don't leave him to cry out for hours though, it's not going to help him. And if your dog has any predisposition to being anxious, there's a good chance you're going to trigger full blown separation anxiety.

Here's a biggie so we talked about things that can affect separation anxiety. This is the biggest thing, and that's leaving your dog alone for longer than he can cope with. And it's the most controllable thing too. It's quite encouraging. Leaving your dog for longer than he can cope with is something that makes separation anxiety worse or can bring it on in the first place. Every time your dog goes into panic and is over threshold, there's a really good chance that his brain chemistry is changing and changing for the worse. So we need to stop that because it's a big, big trigger for separation anxiety. Escalating. But as I said, I think what's encouraging is you are in control of that. I know it doesn't seem like it, I know it seems impossible that you feel like you just can't get anybody to help with your dog. You're going to have to leave him. Not leaving him and making sure he stays under threshold is the key to getting over his separation anxiety. So see it not as a challenge or a hurdle, but see it as an opportunity, because you are totally in control of his fear. You can manage his fear, you can keep it so low that he doesn't have any in fact.

So see suspending absences as an opportunity, not as a great big challenge. In other words, I want you to control what you can control and stop worrying about all the other stuff that people tell you is causing anxiety, because frankly, it's not. Focus on what you can do. Focus on getting your dog over separation anxiety because that is within your control. So we need to stop worrying about why our dog's got separation anxiety. What might of course, instead of expending valuable brain cells on trying to work out why your dog's got separation anxiety, focus on what we do know. And what we know is that you are totally in control of getting him over it. That's what you need to focus on.

Remember, you didn't cause separation anxiety, but you absolutely can be the one to fix it. So jump into my Facebook group. The link is [www.subthresholdtraining.com/facebook](http://www.subthresholdtraining.com/facebook). There you'll find lots of incredibly sympathetic pet parents all going through what you're going through. It's a wonderful community where we all support each other through this incredibly challenging condition. And don't forget to download my free cheat sheets you can find in the group. Do what you can to suspend absences because if there's one takeaway from today, I'd like you to remind yourself you didn't cause a separation anxiety, but you can be the one to fix it. Chat to me anytime. You can book a call at [www.subthresholdtraining.com/free](http://www.subthresholdtraining.com/free) call. All the links I call out today are in the show notes. Thanks for listening in today and I look forward to seeing you online soon.