

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 003 Transcript – Truth and Lies About Crating an Anxious Dog

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-03/>

Welcome to another episode of the Fixing Separation Anxiety podcast. I'm your host, Julie Naismith. And today we are tackling a really, really important topic. We're going to be talking about crates. So to create or not to crate, that is one huge debate among separation anxiety owners. And today I'm going to share my opinion and my advice around crates. I'm going to tell you why crates and separation anxiety are just not a good mix. And I'm going to explain what your alternatives are. Because I know for many of you crating is, it seems almost essential. So, yes, I'm going to tell you why I think it's not ideal. But I'm also going to give you some tips as to what you can do instead. But before I get into why I'm not a fan of crates for separation anxiety, I actually want to start by talking about why I love crates. I know that makes me sound like I'm yeah. What's going on? She just said she didn't like crates, and now she loves crates.

Well, here's the thing. Crates work in the right context. And in the right context, they can be an amazingly valuable tool. So what do I mean by the right context? Well, let me run through with you what I mean by that, and when I absolutely recommend using a crate. First off, house training. House training a puppy. You just can't beat using a crate. Why do we love crates so much when we're house-training puppies? If you've ever had a puppy, you probably notice that as you go through the house-training process, they are really reluctant to soil in their own space in their bed. And the smaller we can make that space, the less likely they are to soil in it. I'm not talking about putting them in a shoebox, but we make the crate big enough so that they're comfortable, but small enough so that they don't feel tempted to treat one area of it as a litter tray. And so crates are so helpful for house training because not only does it discourage the puppy from going in their crate, but we can also keep an eye on our puppy and stop them wandering around and finding spots in the house to go. Because remember, the rule of house training is we want a puppy who is empty. And if the puppy is not empty, we need to keep an eye on them. So when they go out and they empty their bladder or they have a poo and they come back in, they get some freedom. But when we can't keep an eye on them, we need to crate them. Because the worst thing that can happen with house training is an accident in the house. So crates are absolutely an amazing tool for house training. So I always recommend crating and trying out a crate for a puppy, especially if you're going through the throes of house training.

Why else do I like crates? Well, not only do puppies soil in the house, but as you know, they chew. So if we can make the crate comfortable, if we can give your puppy a legitimate outlet for chewing, give your puppy some legal things to chew, then the crate can be a fabulous way of keeping an eye on that chewing. Or at least managing the chewing, making sure he's not chewing the dining room table. But instead, he's all snuggly in his crate, chewing on things that he's allowed to chew on. Managing chewing crates are absolutely wonderful. Doesn't have to be in a puppy either. Chewing can go on for quite some time in dogs. Lots of dogs chew because

it's just great fun. It's like getting into a really good book for a dog, even as they get older. If you're worried about anything getting chewed in your house, you pop your dog comfortably in his crate with the stuff that you want him to chew, and then you manage the problem of chewing the things that you don't want him to chew. So I love crates for managing chewing.

Crates are excellent for calm time as well. You know, when your dog just needs a break from himself, almost when they're doing that crazy Zumies, or they're being really high octane, but, you know, they've had a ton of exercise. And it's not that we don't want dogs to be dogs and career around like crazy things because that's what they want to do, it's just that it's not always appropriate. And crating, if you've ever seen this in a dog that's running around the house, crazily, when you ask them to go to their crate, haven't you seen them just go Ugh, and kind of switch off? So crates can be really nice for encouraging calm time in dogs. And of course, they are brilliant for when we have visitors round. How lovely to be able to ask our dogs to go to their crate when the doorbell rings nicely tucked out of the way in their crate, perhaps in a different room from the visitors. And then we don't have all that chaos at the door when visitors come in. Fantastic for managing those door situations and also crowd control in a multidog household dogs in any house, when there's two or more of them, they're going to spend time passing one another, having their own stuff in the presence of another dog. So there's always an opportunity for a bit of resource guarding. And sometimes, like the doorbell example, two or more dogs can just set each other off. One dog barks, the other dog joins in and it all just gets really chaotic. Crowd control. Crates for crowd control are wonderful. So sending dogs off to different crates, creating some space, maybe encouraging them to do that when they're eating so there's no guarding going on, and encouraging them to do that when there's anything overly exciting going on. So everybody just keeps a lid on things wonderful in that situation. I don't know how we'd get through groomers and vet visits without crates.

Now, whether your dog likes his crate or not, and I'll come on to in a second how we can get dogs to like their crate. Whether they like their crate or not, there are going to be lots of times in your dog's life where he's going to be crated. The vets is an obvious one, and some groomers, too. But despite what we think about and there seems to be this notion that dogs just naturally love their crates. And I think it comes from the belief that all dogs love to den and that crates are just like dens. So all dogs are going to take to their crates? Well, kind of, yes and no. Because when you see a dog that really, really loves their crate, it does seem like they're denning down. Dogs who love their crates, really love their crates. But just because wolves or dogs in the wild love to den, doesn't mean to say your puppy is going to be born thinking that a crate is the most amazing thing in the world with any dog, with any puppy, let's just assume that they might not love it. We're going to have to get them to love their crate. We're going to have to go through a process to get them comfortable in their crate. Don't just assume that it's going to happen automatically. Okay, so how can you do that?

Well, we make the crate a magical place. Basically what we do is we make as many amazing things happen in that crate as possible. So we create this draw. Your dog starts to think, oh, just loving in the crate, because it's just astonishing the things that happen in there. Wow. What do I mean by amazing things and making it magical? Well, for a start, from day one, think about can

you feed your puppy in his crate? Not with the door closed, but can you encourage your puppy to see the crate as a source of food, dropping treats in during the day? If your puppy's comfortable and naturally walks into the crate, feeding him in his crate, thinking about opportunities to safely and happily introduce him to his crate by using food. And I don't mean luring him in and then closing the door and assuming he'll get on and eat. All of this has to be done on his terms. He has to be able to choose to go in there, to choose to stay in there, otherwise it can become really frightening for them. We'll get him to love his crate and think it's amazing by making these associations with all things fun you can give them chew toys in there. You can give them their favorite squeaky toy in there. Maybe they only get the squeaky toy when they go into their crate. Think about how you can just make the crate this fantastic place that your dog is just drawn to. You've got to do this really gradually. Like I say, this isn't putting his dinner in there and then closing the door on day one. This is about gradually getting him to think that the crate is wonderful.

So you go step by step, and depending on the dog, you'll either go really quickly or you might take more time. It just depends how comfortable and how happy they are in there. If you want more information about how to get your dog to love his crate, you can download my free cheat sheet on crate training. And to do that, just go to [subthresholdtraining.com/episode three](https://subthresholdtraining.com/episode-three) and you'll find the cheat sheet in there. Right? You do all of that. You download my cheat sheet, you follow the rules, and you've got your dog comfortable in his crate.

So why am I still against using crates for separation, as it even though I've told you to do all of that and get him really comfortable in his crate? Why do I still think crates aren't a good idea when you go out? Well, here's the thing. A really, really high proportion of dogs with separation anxiety have what we call confinement phobia. So not only do they panic because you're not around, they can often panic when confined. You might go through that crate training plan and make lots of progress. Then when you come to the piece where you're closing the door, you might see that your dog freaks out. And that's really, really common in separation anxiety dogs. My own experience, I've been through this myself.

So with my dog, Percy, I was quite determined to get him to love his crate because I didn't want him sleeping on the bed. I was absolutely fine with him in the room, I just didn't want him on the bed. No, nothing to do with the fact that that was going to make him see himself as the leader and that he would dominate and that I might wake up with him trying to murder me. None of that. He's just really wriggly and I'm a light sleeper. So a few years ago, I was on a mission to try and get him comfortable in his crate so that he would sleep in there overnight. At that time, my other dog, India, loved her crate. Still does, actually, is just so comfortable in her crate. But it didn't take as much effort, anywhere near as much effort to get her to love her crate as Percy. It took me six months to get him to sleep in his crate overnight. And when I say six months, I mean six months of training nearly every single day. There were tears it was frustrating, it was hard for both of us. And then eventually he just he got to a level of comfort that meant I could close the door for long enough that he would just pop to sleep and wake me up at 06:00 in the morning happy and having had a good night in there. But that was six months of work.

So he definitely had confinement phobia, and it's really, really common in anxious dogs. And why do they get that? Well, it could be that they had a really bad experience. So think about it. We've got a dog who chews and who's howling, and we're on the internet and it says, put your dog in a crate. And that's going to work on the separation anxiety. So we put them in a crate and we let them get on with it. I'm convinced that one of the reasons that separation anxiety dogs, or a lot of them, have confinement phobia is that we have been determined to just let them bark it out in their crate because we thought that was the right thing to do. And then what's happened is they've ended up having a terrible experience in there. And even if they didn't hate their crate at the start, they end up hating it. So I'm pretty sure that most of us have done that. I think I did it when he was a puppy with my other dog. I kind of let her get on with it to a degree, and she was fine. I would do it differently now because I know different things. But yeah, with Percy, yeah, he just hated his crate. And if you've ever tried to crate your anxious dog, you'll know exactly what I mean. So I think that could be one reason why they have confinement phobia. They've had a really bad experience of it because we've responded to their separation anxiety by creating them. Or it could just be that the two conditions of separation anxiety and not liking being confined go hand in hand, because if you think about what's going on when your dog is anxious that you've gone out, he's desperate to know where you've gone, and he wants you to come back right away. That's why we see that behavior of pacing up and down, or dogs that go to the door and scratch and try to get out. So you can see in those situations why adding an extra layer of separation ie. the crate, adding that extra division from you could be even scarier for your dog. So I can see how those two might just go hand in hand.

Separation anxiety and confinement phobia kind of being two aspects of the same condition, whatever the reason, and we could continue theorizing, whatever the reason, it's really common. We know that they just don't like being in the crate for the most part. And going back to my experience with Percy, and I've worked with other clients who have tried to get their dogs comfortable in crates. They're anxious dogs. Yes, you can do it. For sure, you can do it. I mean, we can modify most behaviors and dogs, we can change most emotions, not all, but we can give it a good shot. So if you're prepared to put in the time and go at the dog's pace and take tiny steps, there's a really good chance that even though your dog hates his crate now, you could get him to love it, but it would be like pushing water uphill because you have got a lot of bad experience. Or you've got the dog's previous history of disliking and hating his crate working against you. You haven't got a dog that's starting out with crate. I don't know. Yeah, fine, whatever.

When a dog really hates its crate, when the dog hates anything or is frightened of anything, it's a very long process to turn around that emotion. So, sure, you can do it, but be prepared for it to be slow and take a long time. The other thing that you might notice is if you've ever created your dog when you go out and he freaks, but you crate him and close the door when you're at home and he's fine, what's going on? So you might have noticed that again, with my own dog, he was fine overnight, but there's no way I could have crated him when we went out. Not a chance. If that's happening to you, you can crate him and close the door when you're at home, but as soon as you go out, he freaks out in his crate.

Dogs are just really good discriminators. They make sense of their world by looking for tip offs, looking for clues. And for them, things that we might think are very similar can be totally different. So your dog who thinks being in his crate with the door closed is fine when you're around, just sees the crate when you're gone as something completely different. It's not just a little bit different, it's completely different to him, and it's scary and it's spooky and it's horrible. So we think, well, why can't you be okay when I go out? But to your dog, it's a fundamentally different experience. Yeah. So like I say, if you are wanting to crate your dog when you're going out, you have to get them to love their crate, and that's going to be a challenge. And even then, they may still not be okay when you go out. That's why I really caution against using a crate with a separation anxiety dog. And I've seen so many horrific pictures of what's happened to panicking dogs in crates. I think that's another reason why I always say, can we just try it out of confinement? Can we try the exercise? Can we try the departures out of confinement and see how it goes? But wait a minute, I hear you cry all the stuff I've read online is that crates fix separation anxiety. And I know I've read that, too. It's everywhere. Top ten tips for fixing separation anxiety. Number one, put your dog in a crate. It's everywhere. So if you've read that and you've taken that on board, I don't blame you because it's really pervasive. Yeah, I wish it did. But not only does it not fix separation anxiety, not only does crating not fix separation anxiety, it usually makes it worse. And I guess the reason why you get the advice to crate your dog so frequently, why you get that advice all the time, is that maybe people think, maybe well-meaning people think it's going to fix the symptoms. If a dog's destroying your walls and you've had three doors replaced because your dog's tried to escape, then, yeah, a crate is probably going to do something for those symptoms and it's going to help with soiling.

If your dog's wandering around the house soiling when you're gone, yeah, then a crate is probably going to do that, too. But like all fixes, that only focus on the symptoms of a problem, they don't have a lasting effect. And the problem with something like a crate to fix destruction or house soiling when you're gone is it's not changing the emotions and it's the emotions of your dog that are driving those unwanted behaviors. Because separation anxiety is a panic disorder, and it's your dog having a freak out, a panic attack when you're gone, that panic can make him do anything. And I'm sure we've all had moments where we've panicked at something. You don't think rationally, you're not being logical, and you'll do anything you can to solve the problem in front of you. A good analogy, and sorry, it's a horrible one, but imagine if you're in bed at night and you smell smoke downstairs and you immediately go into a panic, wouldn't you? You say, oh, my gosh, the house is burning down, got to do something about it. And then you find out that your bedroom door is locked. That lock on the door that you never use has kind of clicked in. Well, you're not going to say, oh, but that's fine. Okay, the door is locked. Okay, the house is going to burn down, that's fine. No, you break the door down and it doesn't matter if you haven't got anything to break the door down with. You'll probably try and break it down just with your bare hands. That's what's going on with your dog when you go out. He's not going, oh, okay, it's fine. I'm in the crate and she's gone. I won't panic. His phobia kicks in. It's absolute terror that you're gone, takes over, and he will do anything, anything to try and get to you. The crate doesn't change that panic. It may just contain them, but there's a really good chance it's going to make it worse because he now feels double panicked that he can't escape the crate.

Probably asking, what about those indestructible crates? Here's the thing about indestructible crates, even when they are indestructible, and by the way, I've seen some unbelievable damage done to indestructible crates by panicking dogs. But even if the crate remains intact, even if the crate is indestructible, your dog isn't indestructible. The panic that sets in in these dogs when you're gone can cause them to seriously harm themselves. It's really harrowing to see a dog that's been in that much panic that they cause so much harm to themselves. So I really don't think there's a crate out there that's going to help. It's definitely not going to change your dog's emotion about being on its own. And there's a really good chance he's going to hurt himself anyway. Okay, but you need to use a crate because your dog's destroying your house. Right? And so, of course, the crate is the answer, because how else are you going to stop the destruction?

I need you to reframe your goal here. I get it. I know you absolutely have to stop the destruction, but keep saying to yourself, the destruction comes from the emotion. Even if you can temporarily stop the destruction, the dog will find a way around it until you change his emotion, until you make him feel happy at home alone. So when you think about separation anxiety, change the way you think about it. Instead of trying to solve for the symptoms, trying to stop the barking or the chewing or the soiling, focus on changing his emotion, because that's how you get the behavior change. Okay, but back to that immediate pressing problem, because you're coming home every day and your house is destroyed and your dog's getting injured, the very first thing to do is think about an alternative to crating, which is using a confinement area. So it's still confinement, as the name suggests, but it's a bigger space and it's not a crate. And you would do that. You would create a confinement area by using an exercise pen extended to look like a fence or extended baby gates. You can get baby gates and exercise pens that extend to about 3 meters, 12ft these days, so they can cover a lot of your room. So you create a confinement space that's bigger than the crate, and some dogs will be okay when you do that. They'll be much happier than in their crate. And just giving them that extra space seems to help with the panic.

But it's only some dogs. I wish this was a panacea. I wish it would work for all confinement phobic dogs, but it doesn't. There's still that element of confinement that they just struggle with your next option, and it's quite similar to the concept of a confinement area. You're going to create a dog proof room, so you find a room in your home that you'd be kind of okay with. If your dog destroys, maybe you don't have any carpet in there. Maybe it's got a concrete floor rather than nice floorboards, and you just suck it up and let your dog do what he needs to do, provided that he's not going to hurt himself. So you need to have a room that's nothing in there that you're worried he's going to destroy, and there's nothing in there that he can really hurt himself on. With both of those options, some dogs do immediately improve. Maybe the anxiety doesn't go away, but they seem a little bit better. But unfortunately, it's not most dogs. I wish it was because it would be a really nice solution. Many will still panic. Most actually will still panic even though they're out of their crate.

All right, so how do we fix the problem of that chewing, that destroying that you're coming home to? Again, I'll say the way that we stop these problem behaviors is we stop the anxiety. And

there are two ways to stop the anxiety. One is immediate and one takes longer. So the immediate solution is you find a way not to leave him. Okay, that's crazy trainer speak. You say to me, if you could find a way not to leave your dog, then you wouldn't have a problem with separation anxiety. If you could be with him all the time, this condition wouldn't be an issue. But try to think of this as something short to medium term. This is something you need to do to help him get over his separation anxiety and you to get your life back and not to worry about destruction anymore. Yes, in the short to medium term, you are going to need to find ways not to leave him. You can't get him over the thing that freaks him out while he's still being exposed to it. It's just like trying to heal an open wound. You are not going to get there. Don't immediately think of it as being impossible. Don't immediately think, no, there's no way I can stop leaving my dog. That's just ridiculous. Lots of pet parents that I work with think that at first they will say that to me, or if they don't say that to me, they go quiet for a bit and I don't hear from them. And then they come back because they realize that it is the way to stop the immediate problem. And heck, I used to think it was nonsense, this whole not leaving your dog, I mean, who does that? We've all got lies. But eventually, as you do realize, it's the only way.

I know it's going to be definitely difficult for everybody. If you're one of these people that can't go cold turkey on a change, don't dismiss it and say, well, there's no way from tomorrow I can find him, somebody to look after him. 24/7. That's just not going to happen. Don't dismiss this idea of suspending absences immediately. Instead, say, well, you know what? Next week I'm just going to try, try one day, try to leave him one day less next week. See if you can do that. And then after that, maybe you could do two days and say that to yourself. Can I find a way to leave him a bit less next week and a bit more the week after? Don't give up on this because you can't do it in full tomorrow. I've definitely been where you are thinking, this is just stupid. No way can I find a way not to leave my dog. You do kind of get drawn into it as you see the difference it makes to your dog. Because remember I talked about two ways to stop the anxiety, and this is one, and this is the immediate way suspending absences. But the second one is you do the training. The training works so much better if you can find a way to stop leaving him. Otherwise you just don't progress. Okay? So like I said, don't give up on this notion of not being able to leave him just because you can't do it in full from tomorrow.

Just think of a few ways that you might be able to leave them a bit less and take it from there. I really do think you can do this if you apply yourself to it and if you join my Facebook group, if you're not already chat to other people who've gone through exactly the same process of thinking this was crazy, to actually, yeah, I can do this. And I'm so glad I did because it made a difference. Okay, that's it from me this week. Thank you so much for listening to the podcast. Don't forget to download that free cheat sheet at [www.subthresholdtraining.com/episode three](http://www.subthresholdtraining.com/episode%20three). And if you're not already in the Facebook group, jump on www.subthresholdtraining.com/Facebook. I'll see you all online soon. Bye for now.