

# Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

## Episode 005 Transcript – All About Thresholds

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-05/>

This week's topic is thresholds. And guess what? This is a topic I'm really passionate about. How can you guess? Well, I suppose I wouldn't have named my company SubThreshold Training if I didn't think that thresholds were a super important concept. Understanding thresholds and how they apply to separation anxiety training is so important.

Now, question for you before I start. Do you think you have to be an expert dog trainer to get your dog over separation anxiety? Put your hands up if you think, yes, I can't get my dog over separation anxiety because I am not a separation anxiety expert. Well, I'm going to disagree with you. Now, of course, I think having expertise in separation anxiety is really important. It's what I do, it's what I devote all my time to. And I am deeply into everything nerdy and technical about separation anxiety. I think it really matters. I think it's important to have specialists. However, there wouldn't be a ton of books on Amazon or a ton of online courses on separation anxiety if us, the specialists, didn't think that you could do this without us. I mean, I'd love you to do it with us, but I know that everybody can. There is one thing, though, that you have to be expert in if you want to stand a chance of getting your own dog over separation anxiety, and that is you have to become an expert in your own dog. All right? So you don't need to be a separation anxiety expert. You just need to be the expert in your own dog. And I know you can do that. I think that's totally achievable, and I see it all the time with owners that I work with. And in particular, you need to know how your dog shows that he or she is over threshold. And that's what this episode is about.

We're going to go into that topic in some detail. So when we talk about thresholds, essentially what we mean is a fear threshold when we're talking about it in the context of separation anxiety, that is. And dogs, just like us have different tolerances of things that might frighten them. For example, and I'm sure you've all seen this, a dog might be frightened of men with hats, but another dog just thinks that's nothing doesn't even see the guy with a hat. And sometimes that same dog can be fine with men with hats on the street, but when the man with the hat comes into their house, they are really uncomfortable. So different dogs have different things that they're frightened of, and that can change within the dog, too. And your threshold and my threshold might be very different. For example, I hate horror movies. I really am not a fan. If there's one on Netflix, ain't watching it. But if I had to, I'd be hiding behind the cushion. I'd have the little scatter cushion up to my face to block anything horrible out and I'd probably have my fingers in my ears too. But you might be a massive horror movie fan. And equally, the way I show fear and the way you show fear might be oceans apart. So I tend not to eat when I am really nervous. Exams are a great example. When I was doing my Academy for Dog Trainer study, I did the most difficult exams I've ever done in my education, full stop, including university. And before any of those exams I would be petrified and I just couldn't touch a thing. So maybe you're like that when you're nervous you can't eat. But some people, maybe this is

you, some people eat more when they are nervous. So we have different ways of showing fear and we have different things that we're frightened of.

Just the same with dogs, they have different threshold, different tolerances of things that frighten them and they show different signs. Not only does this differ dog to dog, it differs within the dog depending on, well, depending on a number of things, it could depend on time or context or changes in the stimulus. Oh, stimulus by the way, is just a fancy term for thing that he's scared of. If you've got a dog with separation anxiety who seems to do well at certain times but not others, this is the dog differentiating and we don't know why. We could guess. Maybe he hates you leaving on a Saturday night because he's had really bad experiences on a Saturday night, but maybe he's fine on a Wednesday afternoon because it's always been okay and interestingly. I often get asked question, oh, well he seems okay on a Wednesday afternoon, but not good on a Saturday night. Or he's fine on Mondays, but not on Tuesdays. Or he's fine when I leave, but not when my husband leaves. So this question comes up a lot. Why is that? Why are they frightened sometimes and not others? And we don't know. You could hypothesize and say that past experience might be driving this. They've just had a worse time on different occasions. There might have been some certain triggers at certain day of the week or time of the day, whatever. But whatever goes on in the dog's head, he's decided that sometimes is safe and sometimes aren't. So they have different thresholds for different things and different stimulus.

The stimulus for a separation anxiety dog is obviously fear of being home alone. And our job when we try to get our dogs over fear of being home alone is to show them that it's just fine. If only we could tell them. Obviously we can't. Although have you ever walked out the door and looked at them and said, I really don't know what you're frightened of. I am always going to come back. Don't I always come back? Have you ever said to them, don't I always come back? But they have decided, for whatever reason, that who knows, the world is going to end, the sky is going to fall on their head, they just can't cope, but we're going to show them how to cope. And how do we do that? Well, we take a really small dose, I like to call it, of alone time, and that's a dose they can cope with. So it could be seconds. In fact, more often than not, it's a duration that's way shorter than we expect. Often when I start working with clients they have, I'll ask them, how long can you leave them currently? How long can you leave your dog now? And it's usually way longer than when we actually do the assessment and find out that it's not minutes, it's seconds, or it's not tens of minutes, it's just a couple of minutes.

So, dogs learn by association, and your separation anxiety dog has a really negative association of being left. We are going to show them that they can have a positive association of being left. And to do that, we need to have lots of short, safe absences. So every time we leave them and it's okay, we've got a positive association, so we've got a ton of negative historic associations, but our job is to fill up the bank of experience with lots of positive associations. That's where thresholds start to come in, because if we're going to teach him that he can cope and it's fine, he has to be fine, he can't be upset, he can't be anxious. So we have to understand, is he under threshold or is he over threshold? And if we're training, or if we're going out at other times when we're not training and we're leaving him to panic, that's not a positive

experience. So that bank of negative experiences, it stays full and we're not topping up the positive experiences. And the problem when we let them get that upset and that anxious, either when we're training or when we have to leave them at other times.

The problem with that is not only do we undo that changing of associations thing that we're trying to achieve, but we risk going backwards, we risk making them worse, we risk making even more concrete that view they have that being on their own is scary. So we want to avoid leaving them to get upset at all costs. So important, that point at which they go from being fine to getting really upset, that's crossing a fear threshold, that's crossing an anxiety threshold. And if you have a look at the freebie that goes with this episode and you can find the link in the show notes, you'll see three different zones.

I want to talk you through those zones, and I'm going to do that by talking about a gazelle. A gazelle on the savannah. The first zone that you see, that's a kind of pretty chilled, happy, blissful zone. That's your dog who doesn't have a problem with separation anxiety, just surfing on the couch when you've gone. This is a gazelle on the savannah who's just munching away at the grass and isn't threatened at all by anything. Now, they might see, in fact, they do see in this example I'm going to give you, they see a lion, but the lions are so far away, in fact, they're lying down, not moving. So the gazelle is just like, yeah, what EVs and keeps eating grass? So totally under threshold has seen a threat, but it doesn't feel like a threat. It's just a lion, just a lion. And then the next thing that happens, though, is the lion starts to move. Now, at this point, the gazelle goes, okay, moving lions aren't normally very good. I'm not a fan of moving lions. So he starts to process, what might I do? Now, he's not freaking out. He's not really frightened or fearful or upset. He's just this could go badly. He's definitely uncomfortable. That zone is his holding it together zone. And from there, he could very rapidly progress into the over threshold zone, where he has definitely lost it.

Now, what's going to trigger him is if he goes from being aware of the threat to responding to the threat, and guess what's going to happen? The lion that he's looking at all of a sudden decides to move more quickly towards him and he's really closing distance. So now the gazelle knows this is definitely a lion who thinks he's seen lunch. So the gazelle's response is going to be fight or flight survival mode. And being a gazelle, he's not going to fight. He's not going to pick a fight with a lion. So he flees. Off he goes. He is most definitely over threshold, freaking out, losing it, adrenaline is kicked in, and he's doing everything he can to escape the lime. So he's most definitely over threshold. So those are examples of those three thresholds. So remember, we've got the dog home alone, who's just chill and fine. He's in the under threshold zone. But then in that middle zone, we may have your dog who say you've just gone out. Your dog can cope with a few seconds, but as soon as you go out, he's kind of, this doesn't look good, this doesn't look promising. I'm feeling like this could go really badly. And that holding it together zone. It might not last very long at all. Your dog might not be in that zone for very long. So you have to be quick because remember, we don't want him to go over threshold.

Now, just one more thing to emphasize about why we don't want your dog to go a threshold, apart from the fact that you don't want that, because it's just horrible when they're in a panic. It's

not a good place for them to be, and nobody wants their dog to be so upset that they drool and chew and bark or whatever. But the other side to that is if we're trying to fill up that negativity bank, or rather fill up the positive bank and make sure the positive experience outweighs the negative, we do have something that challenges us that kind of works against us, and that's that. As far as we know, dogs have a negativity bias, and we have that too. If you've ever been in a performance review work and maybe you've got 20 pieces of feedback and then along comes you're reading it through it and you get one piece of negative feedback, doesn't that just crush you? And yet you've got all this other glowing feedback, but for whatever reason, we just zone in, don't we, on that one single negative piece of feedback and it just crushes us.

Well, animals are the same, and negativity bias can be really helpful. Go back to that gazelle. If that gazelle was the sort of gazelle that looked at lions and thought that lions were friendly, that gazelle ain't going to last very long. That gazelle is going to be eaten by the lion very quickly. It's actually much better for gazelles to assume that all lions are going to eat them, so they're going to escape. And if you escape the lion, you get to pass on your genes. So assume the lion is going to eat you. Negativity bias and your genes get passed on, as does the negativity bias. So we all have it. We all have it to different degrees. And it can be a big challenge when we're trying to change emotion, that we need lots and lots of positive experiences to outweigh negative ones.

All right, so our goal with a separation anxiety dog is to build up their tolerance of being on their own by changing their association, giving them lots of positive experiences and doing it gradually. Now, this is so important because as soon as we push too far too quick, we're putting them back into the negative experiences. We're creating over threshold experiences that are undoing our work or possibly making them worse. So we must go at their pace. We must respond to how they're coping with the absence. We never go too fast. In fact, with separation anxiety, you have to go slow to go quickly. Your job then, when you're working with your dog, is, as I said, you've got to become an expert in their anxiety threshold. You've got to know when they're fine. You've got to know when they're freaking out and avoid that zone. And you want to know when they're holding it together. And body language is obviously going to be your key. But as much as you can watch, and I do want you to watch videos on body language and find online materials you also have to understand what's unique about the way your dog tells you that he or she is uncomfortable. And the trickiest one I find often with clients is the holding it together zone. Often it's more subtle. Usually it's way more subtle than the freaking out zone, and it's usually more fleeting. So dogs don't always stay in that zone for very long, but you can start to spot things that they do.

And that's what I want you to do. I want you to start looking for do they do certain things in that zone that holding it together zone that let you know that they may be about to freak out, in which case you cancel the exercise. You don't let them freak out. Things I've seen when I've worked with client dogs. And again, your dog might be different. So this isn't what you should look for, but this is what I've seen sniffs under a door or suddenly alert eyes. I've seen poor raises. I've seen a bit more intense lip licking. And all of those have been for the dogs I've worked with, key signs that, boy, is this dog about to freak. So we better get back in now. Okay, so we're going to

increase their tolerance to being on their own by going gradually, increasing the duration and going at a pace that they can cope with. And what's going to tell us that we're going at the right pace is that the dog is going to remain in that under threshold zone with really nice body language and no signs of body language that's telling us they're fearful or anxious. So that's a quick run through threshold.

There's four takeaways, four actions you can take today. Get to know your own dog's body language. I really can't stress this enough. As I said, I do want you to look at lots of online materials and there's a body language video that's linked in the show notes, but you need to know what your dog is showing. So do they show these common signs? Which of them do they show? Is there anything different? So really get to know your own dog, number one. Number two in particular, are there any precursors to him losing it, maybe in that holding it together zone? He does a quirky little thing that's unique to him that he only does when he's about to get really upset. So work out what's going on in that holding it together zone. Number two. Number three. I say this all the time. Bored of hearing me say this. Use a camera. I know it sounds obvious, but there's no way, there's really no way at all. You can do separation anxiety training without you're on the other side of the door. You need to see your dog. So if you haven't got a camera and you want to start looking at your dog, then there's easy options. You can get an online app, a baby camera app, a security app. You can Skype yourself, zoom yourself, FaceTime yourself, whatever. But do do make sure that when you go out of that door, you've got a camera on your dog and you can see him on your phone number. Four take records, open up a spreadsheet or a notepad if you like writing, and note down everything. Every twitch, every noise, every movement, every shuffle, every fidget your dog makes when he's on his own. Get really good at doing this and start to look for trends. Those are the four things that you can do. All of those today. You could do one of them, but you can do something.

If you want to start separation anxiety training, pick one from the list and have a go. Remember, separation anxiety training is not something that happens overnight. It is definitely a journey. So taking your first step coming off this podcast, if you do nothing else but do one of those four things, then I'll be thrilled because you'll have taken a first step towards fixing your dog separation anxiety. Okay, thanks for tuning in. I look forward to seeing you online soon. Bye for now.