

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 014 Transcript – Why You Need to Stop the Sky Falling on Your Dog's Head

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-014/>

Welcome to another episode of the Fixing Separation Anxiety podcast. This week we're going to be looking at how we can make the world a less scary place for our dogs, and especially for our separation anxiety dogs, and why that matters so much to him, to you, and to your training.

Now, last week I went to a seminar presented by Dr. Karen Overall. If you haven't heard of Dr. Overall, there's a really good chance that you might have heard or even be trying out her relaxation protocol. So Karen Overall is the person who developed the relaxation protocol that I know so many of you use. Anyway, I was lucky enough to go to a two-day seminar where she presented on both days, all day, on all things related to behavior in dogs and cats. Behavior change, behavior medication, behavior training, you name it. Was two days of behavior fest, I guess it was wonderful, really good couple of sessions. And whenever I go to her sessions, she always makes me think about things. I learn a lot and I come out with lots of different ideas and conclusions about the way I do things.

Karen Overall, for those of you who don't know, is a leading vet behaviorist and she is really fascinating. So if you ever get a chance to listen to her talk, I highly recommend it. Like I said, she always makes me think. And one thing that she said in particular during this last session was something that really struck me. She said, the first thing we need to do with a fearful or anxious dog is we have to stop the sky falling on their head. So we can never really know what goes on inside our dog's head. But certainly, when you look at their body language, when you look at all the clues they give off through the way that they act when they're left alone, and when we look at their physiology, there's something that certainly looks like that. They feel as if they're facing a life or death threat. If you've ever looked at a video of a dog that's really panicking when it's home alone, it certainly doesn't look like a dog that's just worried about what it's having for dinner. It looks like a dog who is really sensing, like I say, a life or death threat. And I often wonder, do they think that the world is about to end? I mean, they look that panicked. I don't know what's going on in their head. And as far as we know, maybe that's what they think.

Maybe they think as soon as you go out of the door, that is it, they are done for. Maybe they are just constantly panicking at some imminent danger that they think is going to occur because you've left or even that you're in some danger. And like I say, it certainly looks that grave when you check out their body language. And when we go back to what Karen Overall said, she said there's two reasons why we need to stop them thinking that the sky is falling on their heads, which they might well be doing. So they might well be thinking that. And certainly whether they're thinking it's the sky about to fall on their head or their world's about to end, they think something pretty serious is a fault. So we need to stop that feeling for two big reasons, and I hope wholeheartedly agree with both of these. The first one is welfare, the dog's welfare, and

the second one is training effectiveness. Okay? So I'm going to unpack both of those, and let's start with welfare.

So, when our dogs panic at home alone, they really don't have much choice about that situation. One of the reasons why so many dogs seem like they're trying to escape is because they really don't have any choice. They feel stuck in a situation that is causing them extreme panic. We've never given dogs the option of choosing that situation. And I'm really grateful to one of my clients, Jill Oliver, for first saying to me, she said it about her dog Robin. She said he didn't choose to come and live with me. And if living with me is causing him to panic when I go out, then I owe it to him to change that situation. I owe it to him not to let him feel that panic. I thought that was lovely. And I totally echo that. They don't choose to come and live with us. They are out of their minds with panic when we leave them, our separation anxiety dogs. And it does feel like a massive welfare issue if we continue to leave them in a state of morbid fear every time we go out.

And I think as a dog owner and remember I used to have a dog with separation anxiety, I wasn't always a trainer. I was once exactly in your shoes. And I certainly remember that once I realized once I got my head around the fact that this isn't a dog who's playing up, this isn't a dog who's being bad. This is a dog who is out of his mind with fear every time I leave. I think once that got processed in my head, it just became impossible to leave him at home alone. And I see this time and time again with my owners that once they realize exactly what's going on with a heavy heart, they realize how awful it must be for their dog, and it becomes so difficult to continue to leave them. And I know that it can be incredibly difficult to change things. I know that you don't leave your dog thinking that your dog's going to be okay. I know that for many of you, you go out despite not knowing your dog is okay, and that's incredibly hard. It breaks your heart even just thinking about it. But like I say, I think we owe it to our dogs to let them live a life free of fear. I 100% believe that we need to do everything we can to remove fear from their life.

It's not right that we should bring dogs into our lives, into our homes, into our world, and then knowingly expose them to things that our dogs are frightened of. It's not always possible. We can't always cocoon them 100% of the time. But I do believe we need to try. We need to, wherever possible, do what we can to stop them thinking that the sky is about to fall on their heads. Because can you imagine living a life where every day, every minute, you thought the worst was about to happen? So setting aside the welfare concerns of having a dog who panics when we leave them and we're not doing anything about that, there's also the second concern about the second reason why we need to stop them thinking that the sky is falling on their heads is that we really can't implement separation anxiety training when our dogs are in that state.

Just as a reminder about what we're trying to do with separation anxiety training, we're trying to change how they feel about being home alone. And when we change how a dog feels about something that it's frightened of, we need to give them lots and lots and lots of new, positive, non-scary experiences that are going to outweigh the previous scary experiences that the dog has had. And with separation anxiety training, what that's going to mean is we're going to give our dog lots of new experience of you going out, but not leaving him for longer than he can cope

with. In other words, he has lots and lots of non-scary absences. He stays at home over and over again, but for durations, that don't induce panic. And for most dogs that we work with, the start of training in particular, at the start of training in particular, those absences can be tiny. They seem ridiculously short. They can be seconds. Sometimes we can't even get out of the door without them panicking. And we need to take a different approach. But we need to do that.

We need to start with durations that your dog is going to be really comfortable with, because we have to send a message to our dogs that there is a new way of doing things. There's a new non scary way of being left. Maybe in the past when you left, it was scary for your dog, but we're saying to him now it's different. Now when you go out and you do those short, safe, practice absences. Now when you go out, you're saying to your dog, everything's okay, and your dog starts to learn because it's having lots of non-scary experiences. So we are trying to convince him that everything is fine, even if it was awful in the past. And I often talk about a bank account of experiences for the dog. So on one side of the balance we've got a ton of the historic, previously scary experiences of being left alone, which is essentially the dog's life up to the point at which you realize it's separation anxiety training, up to the point where you realize it's separation anxiety sorry. And you stop leaving them. So in the past, leaving was scary. Then you work out, it's separation anxiety. You stop leaving them, hopefully, or you start training and things start to feel different. So you start separation anxiety training. And when you do so, what you're then doing is you're adding some positives to the other side of the bank balance.

So we're starting to balance things out. You're starting to add lots and lots of safe absences. But here's the kicker. In order to balance the books, you need to put in a lot into the positive balance. You really need to fill the positive side of things with a ton, a huge amount, an incredible number of non scary experiences to balance the book. Why is that? Well, as far as we know, dogs like us most likely have a negativity bias. What do I mean by that? Well, I read somewhere the other day about criticism that 1000 positive reviews, it was talking about somebody who'd listed their book on Amazon, and 1000 positive reviews plus one critical review equals one critical review.

In other words, we far outweigh, we put a huge weight on negative experiences, and there's some evolutionary reasons for that. It's better in the wild to assume that something is going to kill you, even if it's not, than assume it's not going to kill you. Because if you assume the lion is going to kill you, you're going to run away. If you assume the lion isn't going to kill you, that the lion isn't threatening, that the lion isn't scary, if you're a zebra, you're going to get eaten up. So it helps. Negativity bias can help, but it's not helpful when it comes to changing emotion. And the same is true with dogs as far as we know. And it certainly looks like we have to give them a ton of positive non scary experiences in order to balance the books to make a change. And so you can hopefully start to see why it's so tricky. It's not impossible to have true success with desensitization training if we have a dog who we are still forced to leave alone. And I know that's many of you, so don't switch off. Don't shout at wherever you're playing this podcast. Don't shout at me. I just want to tell you the truth. I know I can't sugarcoat it. I hate this bit. I hate being the person to tell you that in order to get your dog over separation anxiety, you have to stop leaving your dog. Because that also sounds a bit crazy. If you didn't have to leave your

dog, then separation anxiety wouldn't be a problem, would it? If you didn't have to go to work, if you didn't have a social life, it wouldn't matter. You could be with your dog all the time and the separation anxiety wouldn't be an issue.

But the reason I am such a broken record on this topic, I know I am, is it's tough love. I want you and I want your dog both to overcome separation anxiety. So I need to be upfront about what it's going to take. If I tell you you can start training and you can keep leaving your dog, you're just going to get so frustrated because training is not going to work. And here's the thing, there's a really good chance your dog's going to get worse. So that's why it's tough love. I just want what's right for you and your dog. All right, all well and good. I'm living in fantasy land here, aren't I? Because how on earth are you going to make this happen? How are you going to stop your dog's world or stop the sky falling on your dog's head? How do you do that when you've got work to go to, when you've got bills to pay, when you've got family commitments, when you've just got stuff going on? I do know it can be tough, and I don't just say that glibly.

Remember, I have been in your shoes. And I remember the first time I realized that we couldn't leave our dog and it was a bombshell. And what I do know, though, is even though it starts out feeling impossible and ridiculous, and it just seems like you just know where you can do it, you find a way. You do find a way of doing it, because you want the best for your dog. I know you want the best for your dog anyway, even if you're still having to leave your dog right now. I know you want the best for your dog. But not only do you want the best for your dog, the reason why you find a way not to leave your dog is because you want your dog to get over separation anxiety.

You want your life back. And so as that realization creeps up on you, I've noticed it happened to me. I started off thinking we could never find a way not to leave him, and we did. I see it with the owners that I work with. They start off thinking that's crazy, and gradually, over time, they find ways to do it so it can be done. And I see it over and over again. So even if it feels hopeless and crazy and ridiculous now, do you know that you can do it? Don't forget, I've got a group for people just like you over on Facebook, a group for supporting separation anxiety dog owners. And if you are not in that group, definitely join it because you'll find a ton of threads about this exact topic, about how can I find a way not to leave my dog, tips, ideas and people sharing what they've done, which hopefully can be inspirational for you. So if you're not already in that group, do head over there. If you go to [subthresholdtraining.com](https://www.facebook.com/subthresholdtraining) group, you can find the link to the Facebook group and I'll also post the link in the show Notes [subthresholdtraining.com](https://www.subthresholdtraining.com) 14.

But in addition to my group, I've also now started up a brand-new network, so completely off Facebook. The problem with Facebook there's a few problems with Facebook. I love Facebook, it's very helpful to our support group, but there are some problems we all know and we all associate with Facebook, and one of them of course, is privacy. We're all very concerned about what we share on Facebook. So I've always wanted to connect owners, to find a way of connecting the 7000 owners who are in my Facebook group. It grows by 1000 every month, so who knows, it'll soon be at 10,000 maybe by the time you're listening to this podcast. Now, I've always had this dream of connecting people because there's got to be certainly in big cities in

the US, in Canada and in the UK, there's got to be a ton of owners with separation anxiety dogs who would gladly just swap dog sitters. Now of course you can go and find pet sitters, you can go and find pet sitting services, but one thing I hear consistently from people who do use those services or who do hire dog sitters, is that you just can't get across to people that not leaving your dog, that the reason you're hiring them. The reason you're taking them on is that you want them not to leave your dog. And I think some people don't quite get that. They don't quite believe that that can be the case. Surely it's okay if I go out for half an hour. Have you had that where you've had a dog sitter and they come back and they said he was great, I had to pop out for an hour, but he was a bit excited when I got back. But he seemed fine. And you're just horrified because you hired them to be with your dog for 4 hours not to pop out. Like what part of do not leave my dog alone constitutes you going out for an hour? Sorry, off soapbox, but we've all been there, right? So I just thought, there's got to be a way of connecting people in this group, or connecting people outside of my Facebook group to support one another. Imagine having someone come and sit your dog who actually understands what it's like to have a separation anxiety dog. How amazing would that be? But that's why Facebook is problematic for that. Well, we don't want to share stuff. We're all a bit reluctant to share information about ourselves. And Facebook doesn't have a really good way of sharing location other than you listing it on your profile.

So I'm starting a networking group. It's going to be a networking group just for people whose dogs have separation anxiety and who are looking to find somebody to sit their dog and who are willing to trade a sit. So if you find somebody who lives in your town, in your neighborhood, and you're willing to sit their dog for a few hours a week, and you're willing to swap for them doing it, then this is the place for you. The great thing about the system that I'm using is without revealing any information about yourself or without seeing information on anybody else, you can just click a button that shows who in the network is nearby. How cool is that? And then you can send them a direct message. So it's all very private, it's all very protected, and I'm hopeful that if we get enough people in there, it's going to be amazing. So we're starting small. Obviously, this time a year ago, I only had 100 people in my Facebook group. Now maybe it's 7000. But I'd love you to join this network and I'm going to link to it in the show notes, because the more people that join, the better it gets. The better it gets, the more people that join. So why don't you jump in and be one of the founders? It's totally free. If you're a founder member, you will not pay anything to join this service. So why not? What have you got to lose? Like I say, I'll link to it in the show notes because, yeah, let's get sharing and working together because they say it takes a village to fix separation anxiety. I think it does. And we need to stop the sky falling on our dog's head. So I just hope this is one more way that we can help to do that.

That's it from me this week. Thanks again for listening. If you like my podcast and want to subscribe, head over to iTunes and subscribe there and I would be so grateful. If you are enjoying listening to the podcast, I'd be so grateful if you could leave me a review again over on iTunes and you can find the links in the Show notes. Anyway, I hope you have a great week and I look forward to talking to you all next week. Bye for now.