

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 015 Transcript – How To Cope With Dogs Who Hate The Car

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-015/>

Welcome to another episode of the fixing separation anxiety podcast. So today we're talking about a different type of anxiety, not separation anxiety, and that's anxiety over car journeys. And for the most part, cars predict good things for dogs. So why do so many dogs seem to have issues with car rides? Well, in this week's episode, I'm going to explain why some dogs find car journeys so scary. And if your dog whines, cries or barks or kicks off in the car, I'm going to explain to you what you can do about it.

It's so funny because dogs do seem to have this love-hate relationship with cars. Now, some dogs are totally fine in the car. Some dogs you don't even notice you've got in the car when you're on a car journey. But some dogs, you really do know they're in the car with you. And the love hate relationship that dogs seem to have, well, they can absolutely love getting to the park or the beach. The car can mean great things are about to happen. But the reason that some dogs hate the car is that it just can seem like a really scary and intimidating place to them. And it can be both. Some dogs can love the car at certain times and hate the car at other times. There are also dogs who love the car so much. I mean, just think the car is the most amazing thing. They love the car so much because of what the car predicts. Like I said, park, beach, walks, whatever. They love the car so much that they whine and they cry and they banshee, howl and oh my goodness, if you've got one of those dogs, you know exactly what I mean.

We're talking about all of those scenarios today. And let's start with dogs who don't love car journeys, though. The ones who don't feel at all comfortable in the car. These dogs are going to show very similar signs to the signs that you've seen in your home alone. Anxious dogs. Things like panting, salivating, maybe crying, low whines, shaking, they might tremble, they might cower, we might see their ears go back. We might see tension and stiff bodies. We can even see them kind of pace around or at least within the confines of the space that they're in in the car. You can see their whale eyes. Just generally a dog that looks incredibly uncomfortable and interestingly, these fearful dogs, the ones who really panic and hate the car, can also be okay on some journeys. So they might hate certain journeys, they might be fine on other journeys, so we can see both in the same dog. Some dogs hate the car all of the time. Some dogs are perfectly fine in the car all the time and sometimes some dogs are both. But you're looking for those signs that I just listed out there.

Now, often the first conclusion we come to when we have one of these dogs that just seems to panic in the car on those car journeys, even the car journeys that are taking them to somewhere they get excited about, so love the destination, hate the car journey. Those kind of dogs, we just assume that there's something that they really dislike about the car or the road or something like that. We assume that there's just a general aversion to the car. However, I want to talk to you about a very specific condition that is really a much more common driver of car anxiety than you

might realize. I want you to check that your dog isn't suffering from motion sickness. From car sickness. Why? Well, it is so common for dogs who have motion sickness to start to dread the car and so much so that you might not see any signs of grogginess or illness or just general malaise. Instead, you might just see the anxiety or stress, which is why you might be surprised that I'm even mentioning motion sickness because you're probably listening to this going, no, this is panic. This isn't like feeling a bit unwell. This is panic, Julie. So bear with me, because even if your dog doesn't get motion sickness now, even if they don't have issues with car sickness, even if they only had one bad experience, that can actually be enough to make them hate car journeys. It just takes one bad experience for them to dread being in the car. And that one bad experience could have been when they were younger, it could have been under certain conditions, maybe it was a certain type of road. And you just maybe remembering now that your dog did once seem to have a really bad bout or dose of car sickness. It just takes one event. It felt so horrible, it felt so aversive to the dog that ever since, they might dread the car. So don't rule this out just because you think that your dog doesn't seem nauseous at all when they're in the car. But how can you tell?

Well, sometimes the symptoms of motion sickness, car sickness, are really obvious and they're what you would expect them to be. They're very similar to the ones that we would have when we get seasick or car sick. Your dog might look limp or kind of wobbly, kind of like drooling, although drooling, of course, can be a sign of anxiety and of course they might be vomiting. So it's kind of that whole package of things that just general ugh look about them and you'll recognize it because it's what you would expect if you saw somebody, a person with car sickness. And sometimes the signs that it's motion sickness aren't that obvious, though your dog might just look upset now that either can be because they're no longer sick, they're no longer suffering from motion sickness. It's just a past experience. Or it might be that they get so anxious when they're in the car now because of the car sickness, that the signs of anxiety are much more prominent and more visible than any signs of sickness, and they're not vomiting. So you're not even thinking about motion sickness. So if you have any suspicions at all that it might be motion sickness and in fact, if you haven't ruled out motion sickness in your dog as a cause for anxiety, then go and speak to your vet, because there are medications that we can give to our dogs for car sickness, just as there are medications for people with motion sickness. And they are incredibly effective. And if you try that medication and your dog seems probably better in the car, then you know what's been causing it. So it's worth a shot and it's definitely worth talking to your vet about, right, okay, so it might not be motion sickness. You might rule out that it's definitely not motion sickness. It might not be that your dog had one really bad experience, bad nauseous experience in the past that left him frightened of car journeys. So you might just conclude no, it's none of those. You might just conclude it could just be that your dog is fearful of car journeys for whatever reason, that we don't know. And sometimes with dogs, we just don't know. Sometimes with dogs, we don't know what's causing their fear. We don't know where it's come from. And sometimes we just have to say it is what it is.

So if your dog falls into this category, if it's not motion sickness, what can you do? Well, the good news is you can teach your dog to be happier and more comfortable in the car, and you're going to use a technique that you're really familiar with from separation anxiety training. You're

going to use Desensitization and as well as Desensitization, the great thing about working on car anxiety is that we can add food to the equation. And food helps us to do what trainers call counter conditioning. Counter conditioning sounds fancy, but essentially it's just changing how a dog feels about something he doesn't like by making him associate the thing he doesn't like with food. It's a really powerful process. So we have a dog who say is frightened of shoes, it happens. And what we can do with Desensitization and counter conditioning together is we can start to get a dog to love shoes because all of a sudden, shoes start to predict that some amazing food is going to happen. Really, really powerful stuff.

Whenever we want to change fear in our dogs, the number one rule is we're going to go slowly. We do it with separation anxiety training. We do it with any context where we're trying to change fear and trying to get our dogs happier and you'll know this by now, if you're working on separation anxiety training, you know, you go slowly, you go to the dog's pace. We never push our dogs, we never go faster than our dog can cope with. So that's the rule of changing a fearful emotion in a dog. And the same is going to be true with car anxiety training, okay? So if you want to give this desensitization and counter conditioning thing a go, if you want to use that to help your dog feel more comfortable in the car, then I've got a free training plan for you. I like my plans and I know you like your plans, too. So always work with a plan when you're training, you get much better results. You and your dog are much clearer about what's expected, expected in training. So always work with a plan.

Now, although I've been talking about car journeys, so actual movement being in the car with the dog, up to now, many of you have got dogs who you tell me can't be left in the car when you pop to the shops or you go into the bank. Do people still go into banks? Yeah, we do. When you, you just leave your dog in the car for a few minutes. And I see this all the time. I saw it in my own dog, I see it in the owner dogs that I work with. So I see this all the time. It's very common. If you want your dog to be more comfortable with that, you can absolutely do it. And guess what? You're going to desensitize. You're going to use the Desensitization method to get your dog to be comfortable in the car. So stationary car here, I'm talking about, you want to separate out dogs who get anxious when you're driving, when they're on a journey, and dogs who get anxious when they're left in a car. Now, your dog might get anxious in both contexts, in which case you would train in both contexts.

So, let's get back to how you're going to make your dog feel comfortable. When you just pop out and leave them in the car for a few minutes, you're going to use Desensitization. And as we know, that's gradually getting your dog comfortable with being in the car by using tiny, tiny steps, you would go out of the car for a few seconds and you'd come back. Maybe you might even start with just opening the car door and closing and you go at the dog's pace, broken record time. But you go at the dog's pace, you never go too fast, you never go too far, and you just go at a pace which is comfortable for the dog. That's how you're going to help him be comfortable in the car when you need to pop out and do something. Now, of course, maybe that's not priority. It's really important. I think that when we do work with these dogs who often have multiple problems that we prioritize. So if your dog has home alone, anxiety and struggles, being left in the car when you go to the grocery store, maybe the home alone training is more

important. You need to decide. But I'm going to guess that being able to leave your dog when you go out properly is more important than being able to leave your dog in the car when you go to the shops. But you need to decide that. But I would say prioritize, you don't want to be training for everything. Okay? So that's what we can do to help a dog who's anxious when they're in the car.

But let's go back to the dog who's not anxious in the car. In fact, the car is the most amazing place, and they howl and whine the whole time they're in the car because it's the best place. I mean, that excited dog, the one who literally cannot wait to get to the car. All right, I am not going to lie. This behavior is a hard one to tackle. And the reason it's hard to tackle is it's another form of emotional behavior. What do I mean by that? Well, I've talked about it before, but a quick refresher when a dog let's go back to our home alone dog, when our dogs are home alone and they're panicking when they bark or when they chew or destroy or do all that stuff that frustrates the heck out of us. When they do that, their behavior is coming from their emotion. Their fear of being home alone causes them to do all those things. So to change the behavior, we change the emotion. And it's always a longer haul to try and change an emotional behavior than it is to change a behavior that doesn't stem from how the dog feels. So it's easier to teach a dog to sit than it is to teach a dog to be happy home alone.

Now, with a dog who is bursting with excitement in the car, we're not dealing with fear. We're dealing with Christmas Day, best day ever. Anticipation, excitement and joy. And so that howl, that bark that they do constantly on the way to the park, that's like the scream that we let out when our team wins the cup, when somebody scores a goal or, I don't know, when we win the lottery, it's that excitement scream. And if you watching your team play and they score and somebody says to you have to be quiet, what's the chances? Right? Because it's just coming from inside. It's a behavior that just happens because of how you feel. And so in the same way that it's hard for us to keep quiet when things are so exciting, it's really tough to get a dog to hold it into it's. Not that you can't do it. It's just going to take a lot of patience, an awful lot of repetition, lots and lots of training. And you're probably also going to need a fancy piece of equipment called a remote feeder, which is a dispenser that gives your dog food, which you control remotely. Why do you need that? Well, for the most part, dogs aren't sitting next to us in the car. So we do need to find some way of rewarding the behavior that we want. And remote feeders can be great for that. Slightly difficult in that remote feeders operate, you can either program them so they just dispense a treat every 5 seconds, every 10 seconds, or you can use the remote control. I don't want you to get a remote feeder and use the remote control while you're driving. Okay? But if you do want to use a remote feeder, I've included a couple of links in the show notes.

Like I say, you can definitely train it, but you need to know that you're going to have to be really dedicated. You're going to have to really stick to it. And every single time you go on one of these journeys where your dog gets as excited as Christmas morning, then just know that you need to train every single time too. And so my best advice to you, unless this is the only problem behavior that your dog has, then I might say just maybe just try and accept the racket because you've probably got other stuff that's more important that you need to work on and

maybe not even, just accept the racket. I've now come to the conclusion that I kind of want to celebrate this stuff in my dog because they're not with us very long. And doesn't it make your heart fill with joy to see how happy their capacity for happiness, how happy they can be? And so why not try and celebrate it? It's your dog's way of telling you that that daily trip to the park that you take your mom, that doesn't seem very significant to you, but that daily trip to him is like you winning the lottery every single day. And wouldn't it be amazing if we could be excited as that even once a week, once a month, once a year even. And our dogs are that excited every single day over something as seemingly mundane as going to the park. And so that's why I say maybe we should celebrate it because isn't it amazing how they can be so excited about such small things every single day of their life? It's really joyful.

All right, before I finish, I just want to say one final thing about car safety. Well, a couple of things actually. So first, if your dog rides in the car with you, do make sure that they're going to be okay if you get involved in a crash or a collision. Just as we have seatbelts to protect us. So do dogs need something? So dogs need something to keep them safe. Things to consider include safety harnesses and crash tested crates. In fact, you can get crash tested. Safety harnesses just means that it's harnesses that have been tested to protect the dog in different scenarios, different collision scenarios. And I've linked to some of my favorites in the show notes. Second thing to say about safety is if your dog is going to be in the main part of the car, so not in the boot or the trunk, then make sure that they are not sat close to an airbag that's going to go off. So if they are in a seat where there is an airbag, you need to make sure that the airbag can be disabled. Remember that airbags are designed to cushion human bodies in the event of a crash. In fact, they're meant to cushion, they're designed to cushion male bodies, not smaller female bodies. But it's a whole other topic and so when they're suddenly inflated, they are overpowering for dogs and they can seriously injure your dog. So they're not designed to protect dogs. In fact, what they'll do is they will injure your dog when they go off. So make sure that your dog is sitting in a seat that either doesn't have an airbag or whether airbag can be disabled.

And final point on safety, I am sure I don't need to say this, but I've talked about leaving your dog in the car. So let's just remind ourselves, don't leave your dog in the car even if it's vaguely warm. It feels way warmer to our dogs than it does to us. They're way more sensitive to heat. So don't leave your dog in the car if it feels even vaguely warm to you. I know that's common sense and I know most of you know it, but I just wanted to say it okay that's it from me on cars.

That's it from me for this week. I really hope this has been helpful. Remember that for the most part, we really can make dogs feel better about stuff they don't like. We just need to find the right training. If you've liked this episode, I'd love it if you could subscribe on iTunes and even better, if you could head over to iTunes and leave me a review, I would be so grateful. Thanks again and I look forward to having you on the podcast next week. Bye for now.