

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 017 Transcript – What Do You Need To Know About Your Senior Dog's Anxiety

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-17/>

Hello, and welcome to another episode of the Fixing Separation Anxiety podcast. I'm your host, Julie Naismith, and this week we're talking about senior dogs and separation anxiety. Owning a senior dog is a responsibility and a privilege. As you know, if you own a senior dog and if you do care for a senior dog, you'll know that you have to expect and you will experience all sorts of changes. One thing that can happen in an older dog is that they can start to develop anxiety at being left home alone, even if they've been fine all of their lives. So in today's episode, I'm going to explain what to look for, what might be going on with your dog, and how to address whatever is going on with your senior dog who's now getting upset at being home alone.

Okay, let's dive straight in and talk about the signs that your senior dog might be starting to feel anxious at home alone. And essentially, you're looking for the same big three signs that we see in any other dog who we're concerned may have separation anxiety. So those big three signs, the first one is vocalization, excessive vocalization. So this could be barking, whining, howling, crying, whatever. The key, though, is it's excessive. It's way beyond the norm. Often it goes on in duration. And so this isn't a dog who maybe barks for a few minutes when you just go out. This is a dog who is really persistent, really perseveres with their vocalization. The second sign that we look for is house soiling. And this is particularly something we look for. This is a particular red flag if this is happening in the dog who is fine the rest of the time. So this dog never soils the house when you're around, but it only happens when you go out. The third thing we're looking for, the third big sign is do they destroy do they rip things up? Do they shred things? Do they destroy baseboards and floorboards and doors? And are they getting a plaster board? Are they destroying entry and exit ways? That's a particular sign that it could be separation anxiety. And those are the three big signs, and dogs don't need to display all of those for us to conclude it's separation anxiety. And actually, they don't even need to display any of them. So it could be one of those. It could be none of those, because there's other things as well that dogs do that maybe aren't quite as noticeable, but would still tell us that the dog is anxious home alone. And that could include anything from pacing to salivating and drooling to being hyper vigilant. That's a dog who's, like, constantly on guard to a dog who just looks really tense and stiff. The whole time that you're gone. So it could be one of the big three, it might be none of the big three. So you kind of have to be quite sleuth like about it. And so if you haven't already set up a camera on your senior dog, I highly recommend it.

Now, when do you need to be concerned about changes in your dog's home alone behavior? So if someone comes to me and they want my help with their dog separation anxiety, and they tell me that their senior dog, so let's say, and senior can get classified at different depending on the breed and the size and so on, and some vets would say that senior starts at seven. And I've worked with vets who say senior starts at nine. But let's say a dog who's seven-ish or older who

suddenly starts with separation anxiety where there hasn't been any change in the dog's circumstances and in their life. So you haven't recently moved house, you haven't recently adopted this dog, nobody has left the household, there hasn't been a sudden change in routine. A dog like that, a dog with that context where the owner comes to me and says, my dog has just started with separation anxiety, he's always been fine, I don't know what's going on. Then my immediate reaction is we need to get this dog to the vet. Now, I'd like every owner to talk to their vet about separation anxiety in their dog, but I especially need you to do this if your dog has only recently developed separation anxiety as a senior, okay, so you need to do this. Go and talk to your vet. More than likely with a senior dog, you're taking your dog to the vet every six months or so anyway, and it can be three to four months as the dog gets older. So when you do your regular visit, make sure you bring up the change in your dog's home alone behaviors. If you've only just gone and your next visit isn't for another six months, I'd go back. Don't wait. Six months is a long time to wait. But if you've got an appointment coming up in the next few weeks, then absolutely let your vet know that your dog is out of the blue, struggling, being home alone.

And why do you need to do this? Well, the biggest reason is that the symptoms of separation anxiety, the behavior can look very similar to some of the things that we see in dogs who have cognitive dysfunction. So dogs who are getting essentially doggy dementia and those symptoms can either be as a direct result of the cognitive dysfunction, so the dog might just be behaving in that way because of the decline or because your dog feels unsettled as a result of the cognitive dysfunction. They might feel really stressed about being home alone without you. Either way, if your dog starts with separation anxiety later in life, you must go and speak to your vet. Now, the other reason why it's so important to talk to your vet about a senior dog with separation anxiety, but I want you to do it with all dogs, but especially with a senior dog, let's rule out pain. We know there's a really strong link between anxiety and pain, so we need to make sure that it's not a change, some physiological change that's affecting your dog's comfort of being home alone. And I experienced the impact that pain can have on a dog and their home alone state a few months ago.

Myself, Percy, most of you would know, and sorry if I told you this before, but Percy is my dog who used to have separation anxiety. And we got him over it and we got him to a really good place. And then about actually, nearly a year ago now, he started to regress. Like, regress big time. I was like, oh, my gosh, how can this be? I'm a separation anxiety trainer and I have a dog who all of a sudden can't be left alone. What is going on? So, obviously, I'm watching hours of video, I'm trying to work out what's going on with him. There doesn't seem to be any plausible explanation for it. When that happens with my clients, what I say to them is, don't worry, don't panic, it will be fine, we will get them back on track. But obviously, I was worried. I didn't feel fine and I didn't think we were going to get him back on track. But I started to redo all the training that we'd done many years ago and that, frankly, I'm now a lot better at now, because back then I had no clue what I was doing. I vaguely had a sense of what desensitization is now. I really know it.

Anyway, so I cracked on with the training and we started to see some improvement. But it wasn't like he did suddenly bounce back. So I was a bit bemused. Then one day I get up and

discover that Percy won't get out of his crate. Now he's the bouncy crazy guy who, in the morning, it just, like, gives you that hard stare until you eventually give in and go to the park with him. So he's an active guy. One morning, he won't get out of his crate. So I know this is not right, but, I mean, really, he will not move. So, obviously, we rush him straight into the vet and it turns out he had injured his back, he'd compressed a disc, he had issues with two vertebrae in his back and he was in an extreme amount of pain. When we talked to the vet and we talked to the physio, it was quite clear that this wasn't. And certainly based on what had happened prior to him not being able to get up, it was obvious that this wasn't something that had just occurred. So he had most likely been in pain for quite some time. But you know what dogs are like, they are devils for not showing pain to us. So there is no doubt in my mind that what was going on with Percy was pain. He was in pain and that pain was making him feel really anxious and unsettled. He felt so worried by his pain. If I could go into his head, this is what I think was going on. He felt so worried by this pain and so unsettled by it, that he didn't want me to go, he didn't want me to leave him. And hey, presto, we work on his back, we get him on painkillers for a short period of time, we improve things for him and he's okay again, thank goodness. But it was really eye opening for me and very helpful to see in a horrible sort of way. It was awful that he was in so much pain, but I learned a ton from it that pain can really be a big factor in fear and anxiety in dogs.

So that's another major reason why I want you to go and speak to your vet. Now there are other things that can cause older dogs to feel more frightened or feel scared when you're not there that can make them feel that way, even though they've always felt really secure when you've left them. And those things can include changes to their vision and changes to their hearing. And it makes sense, doesn't it? So all of a sudden their world just seems a much scarier place generally and they want you to be around. So that's again, something that your vet is going to be able to counsel you on.

And finally, don't forget that as dogs get older, most of them are going to need to go to the toilet way more often than they used to. And that can mean accidents while you're gone. You find that you can't leave them for the same length of time as you used to be able to. So they might have accidents where they previously didn't. And also that can be concerning to your dog. If your dog is so well house trained that they desperately do not want to go in the house, even though they need to go, that can be a cause of stress and anxiety for your dog. So house soiling can all be related to changes in your dogs need to go more often because they're aging. So what can you do if your dog does suddenly develop separation anxiety at an older age? So if it's been caused by something physical or if it's being caused by cognitive decline, then obviously that visit to your vet is going to be extremely helpful. And your vet is going to help you with a treatment plan that's going to work on that triggering condition. And in lots of cases I see that that alone, that fixing that trigger that problem. Fixing that problem alone can change the home alone behaviors, just like the example I gave of Percy with the painful back. Once we'd sorted out the painful back, he felt happier at home again. So sometimes just fixing that trigger, working on that problem, can change the anxiety at home alone.

But if things still don't improve for you, or if when you've gone to the vet and you've run all the checks, the vets run all the checks, if you're still not finding an underlying medical cause, then you might want to do two things. First of all, I would highly encourage you to think about a pet sitter. Daycare might be a bit full on depending on the age of your dog. I mean, if your dog's eight or nine and still an active bouncy kind of dog, then Daycare might be great. But just remember that older dogs don't always love daycare. But I would really encourage you to think about getting someone to be with your dog or find some way for your dog to not be alone quite as much. So that's the first thing I'd encourage you to do. So daycare, pet sitter, whatever. And then the second thing is you can train and hold the dog. I know it's a cliché, but old dogs obviously can learn new tricks. So you can teach your now anxious dog to be comfortable at home alone again, and the training is no different. And also when you're at your vets, when you're talking to your vet and you explain this condition, what's going on, your vet may well decide that with appropriate blood tests and so on, that medication might be the way to go.

So you can do the training and you can medicate. Will it take longer to resolve separation anxiety in a dog who's older? There's no evidence for this and I've certainly not seen a strong correlation. There are way more factors that seem to affect how quickly a dog's going to get over separation anxiety than age. Age doesn't seem to be a big determinant of how quickly your dog's going to get over this. So don't think that just because your dog's older it's going to take you forever to get your dog over this. So if you want to train, you most certainly can. So those are my two things. You can train and you can get somebody to be with your dog. And I really encourage you especially to do the latter because of the welfare side of things. Let's try and make our dogs as comfortable as we possibly can in their latter years. And even sometimes we find when we just do that, when we just stop the fear, when we stop the sky from falling on their heads, that alone can help improve things.

Okay, well, I hope this episode has been helpful to you and your senior dog and I do wish you all the very best with your senior pup. Don't forget that you can find tons of support and advice in my Facebook support group. You can get the link to that, or you can get the direct link to join at subthresholdtraining.com/group. Everything here is linked in the show notes. And also I've got a brand new site where you can go and find a sitter. So you can go and find somebody else whose dog has separation anxiety, who lives near to you and who you might want to train a sit with, and you can find this at www.subthresholdtraining.com/sitters. Okay, thank you so much for joining me this week. I can't wait for next week's podcast. If you enjoy my podcast, I would be so grateful. I would absolutely love it if you could go over to iTunes and leave me a review and subscribe. Meanwhile, have a great week and I'll chat to you next week. Bye for now.