

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 020 Transcript – 5 Big Reasons People Quit Separation Anxiety Training

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-20/>

Well, hello there and welcome to another episode of the Fixing Separation Anxiety podcast. I'm your host, Julie Naismith, and this week we're going to talk about why separation anxiety training can seem just so hard. Now, before we go on, I just want to say a huge thank you. Thank you to you for listening. I know you have tons and tons of options when it comes to podcast, so I'm really grateful to you for listening to mine.

Now, this week I was at a conference listening to my amazing mentor Gene Donaldson speak. She was talking about the need for standards for dog trainers because for those of you who don't know, dog training in nearly every country in the world is a highly unregulated profession. There aren't standards unlike plumbers or even nail technicians. Anyone can just set up as a dog trainer without the requirement to go through any standardized training. And this is a particular beef of Gene, and I love that she leads the charge on this one because it's so important that we do introduce standardization into this profession. One of the other themes that she discussed was that as dog trainers, we have a lot of science and evidence behind the techniques that we know will get dogs over different conditions.

But as a profession, we see lots and lots of searching and running around trying to find different ways to fix things, when actually we know how to fix this stuff. It's just that we're not doing the right things. We're not using the tools in our toolbox, the ones we've had for years and years and years. Instead, what we're doing is trying to find different ways to fix common solutions because we don't know how to fix them with the toolbox that we have. And that got me thinking about separation anxiety, because I hear so often people, owners, trainers saying separation anxiety training doesn't work. But it does work. It works for the vast majority of dogs given the right circumstances. And so why do we keep saying that? And why do we then end up searching for alternative remedies or different training methods when we have a really good method that works? The gold standard approach to fixing separation anxiety, which is gradually getting your dog used to being home alone, going in tiny increments, training at his pace, and pairing that with anxiety medications where necessary, that works. So if it works, why do so many of us give up on it? Why do so many of us seek out different approaches? And why do we not even start it in the first place in lots of instances?

Well, today I'm going to talk to you about the five reasons why I think we give up on separation anxiety training. And hopefully I'm going to convince you to not give up even when it gets hard. So the first one is separation anxiety training is not rewarding. It just isn't. I don't think that any of my clients get up in the morning, I've asked them this as well, and say, oh my goodness, today is separation anxiety training day. I can't wait. It's the highlight of my day. I mean, who says that it's not intrinsically rewarding and the way that humans are hardwired? We need rewards, and the more instant, the better.

The thing about separation anxiety training is the rewards, when they do come, are usually far down the line. When you start training, if you're looking forward to just popping to the store for 15 minutes and you're at 15 seconds, that reward can seem like a long way off. So the reward for separation anxiety training isn't instant, it's a long way off. And that can make us feel like we're doing something that's just drudgery. So one of the things I do with my clients, the people in my online groups, is I build in rewards where rewards don't exist. So we do fun stuff. Yeah, guess what? We make separation anxiety training fun and we have mini challenges. We have little games where people get rewards or they reward themselves for the number of times they've trained that week or how consistent they've been. I try to build in as many of those added rewards as possible because I know that separation anxiety training in and of itself doesn't reward. And the other thing that I encourage in my online groups and my paid programs is for owners to encourage each other. It's wonderful when I see my clients post up in my private group that they've hit 23 minutes today and then everybody jumps on and says, oh, that's amazing. That's wonderful. That kind of reinforcement can be incredibly motivating and it can add reward into a process that is otherwise fairly unrewarding.

Number two, it takes time. There is no doubt about it. Separation anxiety is going to take a lot of your time. Training exercises take time, and also the time it takes your dog to get over separation anxiety isn't going to be short. It's time-consuming in both those respects. And that's hard, right? We're pressed for time as it is. All of us are challenged with a million and one different things that we need to do every single day. And if we link back to, number one, the point about training not being rewarding, that can make it really difficult in any one day to get your video going, to get your stopwatch out, and to get training. So that time that it takes to train can be a real disincentive. One thing that I say to my clients is if you have a day that you've planned, that you're going to train. And I often and most of my plans, by the way, when clients are first working with me and they're working short durations, I ask them to train for no more than 30 minutes a day. When you get to longer durations, you're going to train for longer. But hey, nice problem to have. If a client says to me, I just didn't have time to train today, I didn't have 30 minutes, what I say to them is that's, okay, so if you don't have 30 minutes, don't say I'm not going to train at all, say I'm going to do 5 minutes. There is stuff you can do in separation anxiety training in 5 minutes, even if you don't have half an hour. I'd much rather they did something than say I don't have time to do anything at all. And usually they'll come back and say, oh yeah, I can find 5 minutes. And I give them exercises such as repeatedly opening the door in a way that desensitizes the dog to door opening, or repeatedly approaching the door again, desensitizing the dog to that. So we can usually find something they can fit into their day, even if they're too busy to do a full exercise.

So the third thing, not only is it not rewarding, not only separation anxiety training, does it take time, it's also difficult to do. I mean it's so difficult that lots and lots and lots of trainers won't touch it. I constantly have conversations with trainers saying oh, I don't know, you do separation anxiety. Whenever a separation anxiety case comes to me, I just want to push it your way. Now obviously I'm a complete separation anxiety training geek. I live it, I breathe it, I quite often sleep it, and I wake up in the middle of the night thinking about separation anxiety training. So I feel

differently about it. But I do understand that it can be hard even for expert trainers. And why is it difficult? Well, we need to really understand the dog's body language and most trainers are brilliant at that, so that's not necessarily a barrier for them. And if you're training your dog, one of the things that I say to my clients is I ask them to become an expert in their own dog, so that can really help. But the challenge with separation anxiety is that there are so many different scenarios that can pop up. Sometimes the body language that a dog gives off can be confusing, especially when it comes to things like vocalizing, which I know is not body language, but it's one of the things we look for when we're diagnosing separation anxiety. So body language and stress signals can be confused with other things. And of course, it's a very different way of training for most positive trainers because we're not using food and I use food for every other piece of training that I do. So I understand the challenge of not using food and just doing straight what we call desensitization. And so it is difficult and that's why I make sure that I make it as easy as possible as I can for my clients with things like my separation anxiety training app.

Writing training plans is not something that comes naturally, well, frankly to anybody. And trainers can get really good at writing training plans, but I don't expect owners to become really good at writing training plans, so they use my separation anxiety training app which delivers plans for them over time. I do see owners becoming so expert in this that they write really good training plans, but from the off they work with my app and that takes out a lot of the headache of working out what they should do in each exercise. And another thing that people struggle with very often, trainers included, is the nuances of what's going on with the dog during an exercise. So questions come up like I'm not sure, was she about to go over threshold here or not? Should I have stopped it here? I mean, I did, but I could have gone on. Or clients will ask me do you think that whimper that she did 3 minutes in is where I should have stopped? I mean, I went to 30, but she did whimper at three, so I'm not sure. And so to help with that, whether it's with my private clients or whether it's with my group clients, I do video analysis.

You can't beat video for helping you through separation anxiety training. So I get everybody not just to look at their dogs on a monitor when they're doing the training, but also to record it. And then I get them to upload little snippets that I can review. Or another fun thing that we do. Yeah, I know I do try to make separation anxiety training fun, but another thing we do which is quite good fun is I have regular hot seat video calls. Now, what on earth is that? Well, we have these group video calls as part of my program, but every so often someone volunteers to be in the hot seat and I connect to their webcam, whatever camera they're using to watch their dog and I share the screen with everybody in the group and I analyze the exercise live as the owner's doing it. And there's huge benefits to this. First off, owners find it really helpful for me to give them live commentary on what they're doing, but everybody else loves it too, because they're looking at it going oh yeah, I might have stopped there, but Julie let that run, or oh Julie stopped that way before I would have done. So that type of exercise really helps people to become expert in their own dog, which is the mission that I'm on. If you become an expert in your own dog, you will find separation anxiety training way easier. But just to say if you're finding separation anxiety training is difficult and complicated, you are not alone, but there are definitely things you can do to make it easier. Okay?

So the fourth thing that I find it makes separation anxiety training really hard for people to stick to is that honestly, it doesn't work for every dog. Now, there's no way of sugar coating that. I wish I could say that if you followed my training method, you will definitely get your dog over separation anxiety, but the reality of it is that's not the case. Some dogs, for whatever reason, just do not respond to desensitization training. And I think because of that, because we see people getting stuck as well as we see people progressing, but because we see people getting stuck, we may have the tendency to think, well, if it didn't work for that dog, chances are it won't work for mine. Sure, we get optimistic when we see the success stories, and there are plenty of those, but it's human nature to focus on the negative. And if you see somebody else is struggling with their dog and you hate the training because it's boring and you're struggling to fit it in and you're finding it difficult, then seeing somebody else struggling might just make you give up. You think, is it worth it? Is it worth going through all of this only to find after six months, that we've made no progress? Well, here's the thing. You don't know. Unless you give it a really good try, you can't stop before you've given it a chance. Because what if your dog is one of the many dogs who does get better as a result of Desensitization training? Wouldn't it be worth it? Wouldn't it be worth all the hassle, all the boring training, all the complexity? It would be totally worth it, wouldn't it? So don't give up before you've started thinking, this won't work for my dog. Give it your absolute best shot.

And finally, the last reason that I see people giving up on separation anxiety training, and actually maybe rightly so, is that if we don't do separation anxiety training properly, we can actually make dogs worse. So we're trying to desensitize dogs when we do separation anxiety training, but if we push dogs too far, too fast, if we don't understand their anxiety threshold, if we don't respect the pace at which the dog can progress, then we risk sensitizing them to leaving. We do the exact opposite of what we intended to do. And of course, if we do that, then we are going to get stuck and we will want to give up. And actually, if your dog is getting sensitized by training, then you should definitely stop. You should definitely stop because there's no way we want this training to make your dog worse. But look, if you train well, if you are totally cognizant of your dog's anxiety threshold, if you don't push your dog, if you don't do what it says on the internet where you're told to pick up keys and put them down repeatedly over and over again. If you train well, you won't sensitize your dog, you won't cause your dog to get worse. So if you're doing everything you should, then you really needn't be worrying about this.

So those are my five things, the five big reasons why I see people quitting separation anxiety training and giving up and looking for different alternatives. Alternatives that will not work. So if this is you, what I want you to do is to stay the course. Remember, separation anxiety training is just like training for your first five k or trying to lose weight. If you don't stick at it, you won't reach your goal. You can't just chop and change and try different methods because after a week you haven't lost ten pounds. Similarly, if you've been doing separation anxiety training for a month but you still can't leave your dog for 4 hours, don't give up. It's not that it's not working, it's just going to take more time and more repetition. So often we give up before we give separation anxiety training a chance. And don't get drawn in or dazzled by all the quick fixes that there are seemingly for separation anxiety. The quick fixes that I promise you will not work. So my top tip for you, if you feel like separation anxiety training isn't working, jump into the Facebook group,

either the main one or in my private group and connect with other people going through what you're going through. Because this does work for a large number of dogs, there is hope for getting your dog over separation anxiety. You just need to dig in and stay the course.

Okay, thank you so much for joining me this week. As ever, it's a pleasure talking to you and I hope that you'll join me next week for another episode. But before I go, I'd like to ask you, if you love this podcast, will you head over to iTunes and rate and review it for me? I'd be so grateful if you would. Anyway, that's it from me. I'll see you next week. Bye for now.