

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 021 Transcript – What You Need to Know About The 7 Stages of Separation Anxiety Recovery

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-21/>

Hello and welcome to another episode of the Fixing Separation Anxiety podcast. In this episode we're looking at what it really means to get a dog over separation anxiety, how long that might take, and what recovery involves.

I've been away from podcasting for a couple of weeks, not because I've been on vacation, I do try to podcast even when I'm on vacation, but because I've been busy with the group of owners who've just joined my separation anxiety heroes club. The Heroes Club, and I call it Heroes Club because to me, everybody who commits to tackling separation anxiety is a hero and as are their dogs. But the Heroes club is a place where we work on training together. As you might have experienced, separation anxiety training is super hard. There's nothing intrinsically rewarding about it. It's not fun. It takes time to get results, you have to do a bit of setup and organizing to get on with it. And frankly, it can just be plain boring. I can't wait to get on with separation anxiety training today, said nobody, ever. And whenever we face a challenge like that and you can think about maybe weight loss or couch to five K running challenges, research shows that we achieve much, much more when we work in a community, hence why we go to weight loss clubs and why we join couch to five K running groups. And that community support and setting.

That's exactly what happens inside my separation anxiety Heroes Club. There's a buzz of activity every day. People share their successes, people share their failures, and we all help one another to stay on track with training. At the heart of the Heroes Club is something that I call our progress Tracker. Our separation anxiety progress tracker. As the name suggests, this is what I encourage members to use to work out how they are doing with training. You can actually find a link to the tracker in the show notes if you want to have a look. If you're working on separation anxiety training right now, if it's something you've done or something you're thinking about doing, you will know that a really big focus of us when we're training as owners is the amount of time that we spend on the other side of the door. It feels like it's all about that, doesn't it? How long can I go out for? Is it 10 seconds? Is it five minutes? Can I do 20 minutes? We're really focused on what's going on on the other side of the door and that's fine and it's totally understandable. It's human nature. We really want to know. We want to be able to leave our dogs for X hours. That's why we're doing the training. We want to be able to leave our dog for x hours, whatever that is for you, so that we can get back to normal life. That's why we're doing the training.

However, here's the thing. The focus on duration, this laser focus just on duration can cause a few problems. And the three main ones that I see are as follows. Let me explain what I see as the problems. First of all, we get tempted to push our dogs too far and too fast. And if you're

working on separation anxiety training, you will know that we go at the dog's pace. We only progress as long as our dog can handle the progression. We never push our dogs too far, too fast, otherwise we risk not making any progress at all. But the focus on time can make us a little bit greedy and make us push quicker than we should. Why? Well, because we see progress. We measure progress as an increase in duration. And so if we don't increase duration from one exercise to the next, then we're immediately thinking it's failure. We're immediately thinking, oh, it's not working or I'm never going to get there. Or even if we don't think it's a failure not to push duration, we certainly start to have thoughts creep in that it might be stalled progress. Our dog's going to be really slow, our dog's not going to get where we want our dog to be. So we really get greedy about pushing duration if that's our focus.

Number two, we get caught up in time comparison. It's too easy, just way too easy to compare our dog's duration to others in this very connected world. Of course, in this age of social media, we all know this, there are so many forums, so many ways that we can compare ourselves to others. And you know how that makes you feel. Comparison rarely does anything other than make us feel flat or inadequate. There's a famous saying, isn't there, that comparison is the killer of joy? And I see this over and over again with separation anxiety training. Instead of celebrating our own successes, we are pleased to see when others are making progress. But there's a little part of us as well that goes, I wish that was my dog. And I say to my owners over and over again, do not ever compare your start to somebody else's middle or to somebody else's end. It's so important. Just focus on running your own race. And I think this obsession with duration makes the temptation to compare even harder to resist. Because when we're online running our dog groups and we see that somebody's separation anxiety dog is now doing 20 minutes, our first reaction is, I hope our first reaction is all good for them. But then don't we feel a little bit flat and disappointed because our dog is only doing five?

But remember, just like you don't know what's really going on in a glamorous Instagram photo, you don't know what's going on outside of that photo, we don't always know what's going on with that dog. Maybe the 20 minutes was a one off. Maybe the dog was actually quite stressed during the 20 minutes, but the owner isn't aware of what stress looks like in a dog and is pushing the dog. Maybe the dog hasn't had enough foundational departure training, which is what I get all my owners to focus on. I want everyone to do lots of work, which is not about duration, but it's getting the dog to be comfortable with you going out of the door without getting upset. So I call it door desensitization. And we work that over and over again, and we work it with dogs who are achieving really quite chunky durations. But maybe that dog you see online who got the 20 minutes, maybe there's no steady, solid foundation. And if you don't have the solid foundation, there's a really good chance your training gets stuck. Maybe that dog will get stuck at 20 minutes.

So the third thing that obsessing about duration does is it makes us forget what progress really is, what separation anxiety training progress really is. It is not about our stopwatch. Our goal with separation anxiety training is about getting back to normal life, isn't it? It's about getting our life back on track. Yes, we absolutely want our dogs to stop being uncomfortable and anxious and panicking. But if you're managing absences, more than likely your dog isn't feeling like that.

And the further in the past your dog's experience of being left for scary absences becomes, the more comfortable your dog is. Generally, he's not thinking that you're about to go out of the door and so he better keep his eye on you. He's got used to over several weeks and months. You not leaving him for longer than he can cope, so he starts to chill out. So when we're managing absences, our dogs getting more comfortable. Yeah, that is important.

But the biggest thing is probably we just want to get our life back on track, to do the normal things that everybody can do without having to plan for three weeks to go out and get a pint of milk. And that means that we need our dogs not only to be able to handle longer durations, but they need to be consistent. So let's say your dog can do 4 hours right? Now, I know, I know, separation anxiety goals, you dream of that. But when you get to that stage, whether it's four minutes, 40 minutes, or 4 hours us, I always get people to look at, how predictable is that duration? How much money would you bet on your dog being able to do that 4 hours or that 40 minutes every single time? Is it a \$10 bet? \$100 bet? A \$500 bet? If the dog's 4 hours is more of a one off duration, maybe it's a personal best. If that's the case, then doesn't really matter so much about the 4 hours because you can't go and leave your dog to go to work. If you think that 4 hours is a sketchy 4 hours, you're going to be on edge, you're going to be watching your camera, you're going to be ready to dash back. Or worst case scenario, your dog does have a freak out and you are not there.

So reliability, consistency, predictability are huge and that's why I get my owners to focus on more than just duration. Yes, of course we always talk about duration, but I try to change the mindset away from just the time on the stopwatch to the predictability and the consistency that comes with solid training. It's critical to get consistency and if you've pulled up the progress tracker that's linked in the show notes, you will see that theme running through all of the stages in the progress chart. And just to quickly run through the progress tracker for you, I've got seven stages.

Stage one is where nearly all of us start with separation anxiety training. And stage one is where you have a dog who more than likely won't even let you get out of the door. This is a dog who freaks as soon as you think about going out and lots of you start there, maybe you've got a dog who, yeah, is kind of okay with you stepping outside for a few seconds, but it's not totally comfortable with that. So stage one, stage two, these are dogs who are really, really sensitive to leaving, even just the thought of leaving. And then on the other end of the tracker we've got stage seven. This is the one we all dream about. This is a dog who allows you to live your life again. This is what I call the freedom stage.

When you get to stage seven, you have a dog who can pretty much be left for as long as you need with the almost certainty that he's going to be okay. So you know how long you need to go out for and you know he can nail that. There's a real strong consistency and reliability part to stage seven. Back to what I was saying about is 4 hours a one off or is it something that your dog can do over and over again? Is it that \$500 bet? Now interestingly, while most of us, most of my owners start off looking up at stage seven, shooting for stage seven, for lots of owners, I see that stage six will actually do. Now, if you're not looking at the progress tracker, let me just

describe stage six. In stage six, you're probably not leaving your dog all day. We're not talking about four hour durations, but you do have a dog who's consistent enough that you can do things like confidently meet your friends for dinner without having your phone propped up against your, against the candle. But you might be taking sneaky peeks at the phone throughout, because that's a whole other topic for a whole other episode, how we wear ourselves off looking at our dog even when we know they're solid.

By the way, the answer to that one, how do we do it? Most of us don't. Confession, it's a hard habit to break. Anyway. So you're back to stage six. We've got a dog who will let us go to dinner without worrying. We can go to the cinema, where you definitely can't be watching your camera all the time. You might be able to go to a yoga class. Again, no cameras. You might even be able to go on a date with your partner. So we're not talking about super, super long durations, but we are talking about really reliable durations, ones that you can absolutely know your dog is going to nail. Also, why some owners get to stage six and say, I'm good with that, is, by the time you get to stage six, many of you have got so good at managing absences that you don't need your dog to be alone all day while you're at work. So for many people, stage six is good enough. You've got your life back, you can do things with more freedom, and you might need to still get a pet sitter for longer absences if you're going to a wedding or you've got a big event on. But for a lot of people, stage six is, yes, I'm tasting freedom again. But back to stage seven again. This is where most people think that when you get to stage seven, your dog has been cured of separation anxiety. And I'm going to put cure in inverted commas in air quotes. Because the thing is, with separation anxiety, dogs, they don't really ever get cured of separation anxiety. And it's just like humans with PTSD or humans with bipolar disorder. There's no cure. There's no cure for separation anxiety. What happens with all of those conditions is that treatment leads to what we call a symptom free recovery. So you're not witnessing and experiencing the symptoms that were causing the problems previously. Okay?

So now, before you feel totally deflated about the fact that I've just said you are not going to be able to cure your dog of separation anxiety, just know that once you get to stages six or seven, you will not be worrying about whether your dog is cured and debating the finer details of whether it's cured or symptom free recovery. You will not be worrying about that. You will be happily getting back to normal life with a dog who can be predictably and comfortably left. You will not care whether that means cured or not. And that brings me on to another point, because I find that when owners focus on progress in this new way, they do worry less about putting a deadline on recovery. I see this over and over instead of, how long will it take me they ask, how will I do it? And that's a massive mind shift and it's hugely empowering and motivating.

And that's what we focus on in our Heroes club. We focus on how you're going to do it and the how long. You know, the thing that we cannot control for is the dog's brain. The dog in front of us, we just don't know. So there is no set time for moving from stage one to seven. We do not know. What we do know, though, about how we can affect the time it will take is that what you do as an owner is the most significant thing, aside from the dog's brain, which we can't necessarily do anything about except we can use meds. But the thing that you can do, the thing that makes most difference to a dog's recovery, to a dog getting to symptom free recovery, is

what you do. And when we have milestones that aren't times on a clock, but are much more about getting our life back. And to give you an example, so in our Heroes club, we celebrate things like owners who can now go out to the car and get something they forgot from the car, like when that happens, and when somebody posts a picture of that, we all celebrate. Or somebody today talked about being able to go for a coffee, actually sit and have a coffee, and we celebrated that.

We celebrate the things that show we're making progress and we kind of don't care what that means on the stopwatch. Why? Because it's much more motivating. You'll feel way better when you get those rewards than you're just going, oh, it's 20 minutes. And that's why as a group, we celebrate milestones in the way that we do. Now, if you want to experience what it's like to work through training alongside others, to celebrate when somebody just managed to go to the cinema for the first time, or celebrate when somebody managed to take the rubbish or the trash out for the first time, then the doors to the Separation Anxiety Heroes Club. They're closed at the moment, but they open again on September the 30th. And you can join the waitlist by going to the link in the show notes. But if you can't wait for that, you can always join my free Facebook group and get support there. But whatever you do, don't do this training thing on your own. It is way too hard and you do need people around you.

Okay, that's it from me for this week. Thank you so much for listening to this podcast. I know you have a lot of choices and I am so grateful that you chose to listen to mine. If you've enjoyed it, I'd be really grateful if you'd head over to iTunes and review it. Meanwhile, that's it from me and I'll be back next week.