

## Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

### Episode 024 Transcript – What You Need to Know to Actually Fix Separation Anxiety

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-24/>

Okay, so in the last episode we talked all about why trying to fix separation anxiety can be so frustrating. And as a quick recap, the two big issues with most of the things we try is one, they either just focus on the symptoms of separation anxiety and don't tackle the cause, or two, even if they do try to get at the cause of separation anxiety, they just don't do enough. That's why this week we're going to focus on the tried and trusted method that does work.

Now, by tried and trusted, I mean, this is science, this is evidence-based, and I've seen countless dogs go over separation anxiety by using the method that I'm going to describe to you in this episode. But first, a really quick reminder of what separation anxiety is. Remember that separation anxiety is when your dog is frightened of being home alone. So your dog has a phobia of being left. It's a panic disorder. So it's definitely not your dog being bad, it's not your dog trying to get back at you because you've gone out. Your dog is in a panic when you leave them, okay? So it's really important to remember that because that begs the choice we make about how to try and fix it. The behavior that you get when your dog goes out, the problem behavior like barking or chewing or destroying or soiling or whatever it is your dog does, whatever problem behavior your dog gets up to when you're out, that behavior is driven by your dog's panic. So that means the only way, and it is the only way, the only way we can stop that behavior is to stop your dog's panic.

Now, you can easily and readily fix your dog's panic today by making sure that your dog isn't left. And I know that sounds impossible, and why would you be trying to fix separation anxiety if your dog had company? 24/7? But remember, lots of owners do manage to do that. And it's really important as well when you train. And I'm going to come on to what the training looks like when you train, that your dog has good experiences of being home alone and not bad ones. So you could instantly fix the problem today and it would be by stopping the absences. But I know for most of you, you need a longer-term fix. So let's crack on and talk about what that looks like. We are going to focus on how you can change your dog's feeling about being home alone. You need to get your dog from panicking every time you leave to going, meh, she's gone out again. We're never really going to get dogs to love the fact that we've gone out. Even so-called normal dogs don't love it when we go out because we're the source of all things fun. So when we go out, fun things don't happen at home. And also, if we go out without them, well, maybe, just maybe, they're missing out in the park or a walk or whatever.

So dogs do like us to be around because we're the source of all things good. There probably isn't a dog in the world who is jumping up and down for joy when we go out. So that's not what we're trying to achieve with separation anxiety training. We're just trying to get your dog to go

from panic, fear, full on anxiety, to, oh, okay, she's gone, that's fine. So acceptance rather than joy.

Now let's go through the steps that you're going to use to change your dog's emotion from fear to, oh, that's okay. First of all, you're going to use a standard phobia treatment. So the method I'm going to describe is the method that we use for any phobia, whether that's a phobia your dog has or a phobia that a human has. And at the heart of the process is a concept of gradually, gradually getting your dog, gradually exposing your dog to the thing that scares him. But the key is that we're going to take the scary thing and in your separation anxiety dog's case, it's going to be home alone time. We're going to take that home alone time, and we're going to dial it right down to an intensity that your dog can handle. So when we do the exposing to the thing that scares your dog, we're taking the intensity right down so that it's no longer a fear inducing level. And that is very, very important to remember. We don't expose your dog to alone time that he can't cope with. It's got to be at a level which means in separation anxiety, a duration that your dog can cope with.

And that brings me on to the second point. In order to keep the training at a level that your dog can cope with, you do need to work out your starting point. And by that I mean are you going to start with a duration of, say, X seconds, or actually is your starting point that your dog gets really upset when you even approach the door? So you need to know where you're starting from. That's going to help you come up with your training plans, which I'll come on to in the next step. Now, if you have no way of working out what your dog can do now, then the default starting place, which everybody can do, is to start with what we call desensitizing your dog to you going out of the door. That means your dog is going to check out and stop worrying every time you go to the door to work out what your dog can comfortably do. Now you're going to need a video. You need a live stream video of your dog when you do the departure from the house. So imagine it, your dog's inside, you set the video up. It can be something like Skype to Skype. It could be that you use a baby monitor app, free app that you download. It could be a dog monitor app. Again, free app that you download. And you go out of the door and you watch your dog and you see when your dog starts to get upset. But don't let your dog howl, scratch, soil. You want to get back through that door as soon as your dog starts to even think about getting upset. And as I said, if you can't get to the door without your dog being upset, don't go out of the door. Your job is not to make the situation worse by going out and upsetting your dog. It's to just work out where you start from.

When people do this assessment and what I've observed is there isn't usually a huge range in terms of the starting point. I have dogs that client dogs that might start at 2 seconds and I have client dogs that might start at 5 minutes. I don't have a ton of client dogs where the starting point is 20 minutes. If it's 20 minutes, well, you know what, more often than not, people aren't worried about working on the separation anxiety. So if you are concerned or you don't know how to do this step, this assessment, don't do it. Just start with going to the door. It's not going to slow you down. It's okay to start with the basics. And the great thing about doing door desensitization is it's foundational you going out of the door is massive for your separation anxiety dog. So the more times you can approach the door and come back and approach the door and come back without your dog getting upset, the better. And if you do that over and over and over again and

keep doing it throughout the training practice, so as week after week keep doing door desensitization, you're going to build a lovely, strong foundation. I get my clients to continue doing door desensitization even when their training plans are at 15 minutes, 30 minutes or longer.

So door desensitization is a great place to start. What does that look like? You might start by approaching the door and stopping within six foot and repeating, repeating, repeating until your dog checks out. Then maybe you'll go to 3ft, then maybe you'll touch the door. Don't follow these steps. You need to work out what's right for your dog. And it might be that your dog is okay with you approaching and touching the door handle, but freaks out when you turn the door handle. So go in teeny tiny steps. Remember what I said, you take the thing that your dog is scared of. So this might be opening the door and you find an intensity of the scary thing that your dog can handle. So maybe you have to start with just approaching the door.

Okay, so the next thing you're going to do is you're going to get yourself a training plan. What, a training plan? Yes, you need to know each time you train what your goal is. So say you've managed to, when you assessed your dog, say you managed to go out for 5 seconds. You need to work out what your goal is going to be for that first training exercise. I always say if it's 5 seconds or less, I typically want people to start with door desensitization because 5 seconds or 0 second, there's not a big difference. And I don't want to upset your dog or make your dog worse. I don't want you to do that. So if it's 5 seconds or less, start with a door desensitization until your dog really doesn't care about you going to the door. Then when you can get duration on the other side of the door of about five to 10 seconds, get yourself a plan, open a worksheet and Google Sheets or get a notebook out, however you prefer to do it. And you're going to write a number of steps somewhere between eight and ten and you're going to take the number that you got in your assessment. Let's say it's 10 seconds. Reduce it a little bit and put that as your target step. And then leading up to your target step, you want several shorter steps.

Now, in the show notes, if you go to the show notes, you will see just a one pager which gives you an idea of how to do this. It's just an example of a one-step training plan. Now, training will consist of many, many training plans. So don't just use this one, maybe use this as a guide and then develop others. There are so many steps to training. You're going to repeat exercises or you're going to do so many exercises day after day after day. And there are so many of those that I've created the separation anxiety training app for my clients to generate these plans because I do know that it's a lot of work. But go and have a look at the sample one exercise plan in the show notes to give you an idea of how you take a target duration and you build up to it.

Next thing you're going to do is you're going to do, as I said, lots of repetition. So that sample is just one exercise. Just one exercise. You're going to need to do a ton of exercise. More often than not, we're talking probably hundreds. I know you're freaking out now, so not hundreds in a day you're going to do an exercise or maybe two a day, and then if your dog does well, you'll come back and do another one. So you're going to repeat and each exercise is going to look slightly different. If your dog does well, then you're going to try a harder exercise. What does

that mean? You're just going to sneak the duration up? If your dog doesn't do so well, then I want you to make it easier for your dog and drop the duration back the next time you do an exercise. And don't push your dog.

What we're trying to focus on is, remember, keeping the intensity so low that your dog is comfortable with it. And what that does is it keeps your dog under their threshold, their anxiety threshold. If we train with our dog under their anxiety threshold, then each time we go out, we are saying to our dog, it's okay, isn't it? And the dog goes, oh, yeah, that's fine, I don't feel stressed. Good. Rinse and repeat. Rinse and repeat. You mustn't go too far too fast. You must not push your dog even into what I call the holding it together zone, which is just before they get upset. Don't train in that zone. There's a common mistake that I see lots of people make, and it's based on how separation anxiety trainers used to work. And that mistake is to go out and wait until the dog gets upset and then come back and keep doing that. No, you're not going to do that. That's how we used to train. But if you do that at every step, what you're saying to your dog is, it is anxiety inducing for me to go out, isn't it? You are feeling stressed. Even if they're not in full blown panic, they're starting to get concerned. So every step you do needs to stop before you get to that level. How are you going to do that?

Well, do a sensible training plan that doesn't have big jumps in duration and critically, watch your dog's body language. Remember, you're going to be live streaming via an app. You're going to have one camera on your dog and you're going to have your smartphone in front of you. When you step out of the door, you're going to spot your dog's body language, their vocalization, whatever it might be. And as soon as you see any signs of stress, you come back. So if you're working a ten second exercise and your dog gets stressed at 5 seconds, back, you come. Hopefully you'll get through to ten without any of that. But if during any exercise you see stress developing, anxiety, get back immediately. You want to train about four to five times a week. If you can only train once a week, if you can only do one exercise per week, then do it. It's always better to do something than do nothing at all, but four to five times is kind of a sweet spot.

Now, how long is it going to take you to get your dog over separation anxiety? Well, I kind of hinted at it when I mentioned how many exercises you were going to do and that that was more like in the hundreds than in the ten. So when we work on separation anxiety, what we are doing is changing our dog's deep emotional trauma. It's neurochemistry that's gone seriously wrong in your dog's brain and it does take time to change emotional trauma. It's not something that we can do in a week, even in a couple of months. So brace yourself and get ready for a long process. Best case, I typically see the best cases recovering in about six months. I know sometimes three months, but that's at the extreme end. So if I were you, I'd bank on a minimum of four to six months of training. But do know it can take longer. You will see small incremental changes happening nearly every time you train, which is wonderful. And do know that that is how we are changing your dog's brain chemistry. It's by all of the repetitions of safe tiny absences, repeating and repeating and repeating.

The problem with dogs brains, just like ours, is they tend to have a negativity bias. So think about all the times that before you knew he had separate anxiety, think about all the times you left him that has changed how he feels about being home alone in a pretty permanent way and in a pretty negative way. So we need way more positive experiences than he's had negative in order to outweigh the past scary absences. But don't give up. And don't lose hope. Because do know that if you stick with this method, if you do everything else to make sure that your dog is fully enriched, that they get the right amount of exercise, and that you go and have a consult with your vet about medication, because medication can make this process go way quicker for most dogs.

Do know that there's a really good chance that your dog will recover from separation anxiety. It's just not going to be quick, that's all. If you want more information and if I haven't totally deflated you, then head over into my Facebook group and join that. If you haven't done already, do make sure as well that you've joined my free five-day training challenge. I run these three times a year and they're pretty awesome. We get lots of great results. We get dogs who show even tiny improvements, but show improvements nevertheless in five days. But more importantly, you get to learn how to do this for the longer term. So make sure you join up. It starts September 23. I've currently got a waitlist going and you can join the waitlist by going to [Subpresortraining.com](https://Subpresortraining.com) challenge.

Okay, that's it from me this week. Thank you so much for joining in. I really do appreciate it because I know you've got tons and tons of options for listening. So many podcasts out there. So I'm so grateful to you for tuning in. I'd like to ask you, if I may, if you like the podcast, I'd love it if you'd head over to iTunes and just rate and review it for me. Okay. So I hope to see you on the next episode, but meanwhile, do check out the free resources and don't give up hope, because there really is a good chance you can crack this. All right, bye for now.