

## Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

### Episode 025 Transcript – The Truth About Whether Dogs Every Really Just Get Over It

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-25/>

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 be looking at dogs who seemingly just get over separation anxiety. And dogs just getting over separation anxiety is something that I tell you doesn't happen. So when people do report that that somehow their dogs just did seem to get over it, what exactly is going on? Well, stay tuned because that's what we're looking at this week.

Well, I'm pretty sure you've heard the one about how you just need to let your dog get over it. I mean, I talk about this all the time. I talk about this as being a myth. And I tell people, I tell you, you absolutely must not let your dog just get over it. Because from my experience and from the experience of most separation anxiety trainers, just letting your dog get on with it actually makes things worse. But I tell you, some people absolutely swear by this. Some people will say that they just left their dog to it and their dog got better, maybe not right away, but they will swear to you that their dog got over separation anxiety by just being left to get on and deal with it. So what's going on? Why are there a bunch of us separation anxiety trainers, people who work in the field, telling you not to let your dog get over it, and then there are a bunch of owners who swear by this method and will tell you that that's absolutely the way?

Well, I'm going to be talking about three things, three explanations for what I think could be going on with a lot of these dogs who do, quite frankly, when I look at it, they do seem to be just getting over it. And that's what today's episode is all about. So if you've ever tried this method, and let's face it, most of us, when we come to separation anxiety, do tend to give this a go, either wittingly, either deliberately or, for most of us, unknowingly. I know from my own experience that when Percy had separation anxiety, Percy, my dog, had separation anxiety back in the day. I didn't know he had it. So I did what every puppy owner does when their dog barks or cries. I followed the advice to just leave him, assuming that, as I was being told, leaving him was going to fix the problem. And just for a bit of context, Percy is a year younger than his half sibling, India. And you know what? I did just leave her. She didn't bark, she didn't cry excessively. And honestly, within a few days, she was the dog who could be left, who was perfect, home alone.

So, of course, I tried that approach with Percy because I didn't know separation anxiety was even a thing. Guess what? I ended up getting complaints from neighbors and ended up realizing that this wasn't normal behavior. He most definitely was not getting over it. So like I say, chances are you either have tried just letting your dog get over it because you didn't know he had separation anxiety, or maybe you were told to do this even though your suspicion was that he was in a panic. And I'm guessing that the reason you're listening to a podcast about fixing

separation anxiety is that this method didn't work for you. Now, that probably feels a bit unfair, doesn't it? Why does it work for people who you know but it doesn't work for you?

All right, let's unpack the three, the three reasons, the three things that I think might actually be going on when people tell you that their dog got over separation anxiety by just being left. So first off, reason number one, it might be that their dog that the dog who spontaneously got over separation anxiety. It might be that their dog didn't have separation anxiety or separation related panic, but instead had just what we call a suite of separation related behaviors. And included in that can be frustration, just the frustration of being left. And there are a good number of dogs who do struggle to be home alone. According to some surveys, up to 80% of dogs don't like being home alone. That doesn't mean to say 80% of dogs have a panic disorder about being left, but it means that four out of five dogs don't like it when we leave. And that makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Remember, we are the source of all things fun, all things good in our dog's lives. We control walks, we control food. When we're home, fun stuff happens. Dinner happens, puzzle feeders come out, belly rubs happen, play takes place. And when we go out, when we take our dogs with us, we instigate fun for the dog outside of the house. So when we go out without our dogs, not only does home life become boring or more boring, but there's no going out. So there are definitely dogs who get frustrated that we've left them. They feel bored, they don't have enough to do. They want to go out. Because as I said, going out with you is fun. And you not being around means that it ain't going to be so much fun. Now, there's no doubt in my mind that dogs who struggle with frustration or boredom at home alone do recover, do get over their home alone issues way more quickly than dogs in a panic. And we help frustrated dogs to get over their separation related behaviors by upping enrichment, providing puzzle feeders, doing tons of species-specific exercise. So sniffing and hunting and chasing and doing all the things that dogs love to do. So when we really up the exercise and enrichment. For these dogs we often see an improvement also because they are not in a panic, because their brain is not being changed by the anxiety that they're going through home alone, it is safer to leave them. So usually when I see a dog who I'm told took say two to three months to get over separation anxiety, my immediate response is I suspect it might have been more frustration than fear.

Okay, so moving on, what's the second reason why I think some dogs do appear at least to spontaneously get over separation anxiety? Now, I don't want to criticize any owner who thinks their dog is okay, it's just that the second reason why I think we look at some dogs and it seems like they are over separation anxiety is their symptoms might not be as noticeable but they are still frightened. So maybe they've stopped destroying the house, maybe they've stopped barking all day long and it seems like they are better but it doesn't necessarily mean that they are. Some dogs will display less outward behavior when they may still be very frightened inside. So my suspicion is there could be something going on along these lines too. The dog is still frightened but just not showing as much of the problem behavior.

And the third thing that I am suspicious might be going on is something that we call learned helplessness. So this is a state whereby the dog has tried and failed to get out of the condition that was causing the panic or the fear and ultimately just gives up. They stop behaving, they stop offering the behaviors that they thought were going to get them out of the panic because it

hasn't changed the circumstances. And this is what we call learned helplessness. You'll often see learned helplessness in dogs who are trained with punishment, especially on certain TV shows. So those dogs that are talked about as having a calm submissive state, if you look at what's actually going on, if you look at how they've been treated, if you look at the training method used, usually punishment-based training, the punishment, the pain, the fear has suppressed the behavior. So the dog stops behaving because they just decide that behavior is not getting them anywhere. And in fact, often what happens with punishment, fear-based, force-based training is the dog doesn't know why the heck it is being shocked or beaten or alpha rolled.

So what it does is it decides that not doing anything is safer than doing something because something seems to get it into trouble. And I do hate to say it, but I suspect this might be what's going on with some dogs who just get left to get over their separation anxiety. Eventually they just realize that barking and chewing and destroying or soiling isn't helping and then they give up. They go into this state of learned helplessness. They've just accepted the state that they're in. They've accepted the fear almost. And so they just stop behaving it can look like it's worked. But the thing is, from whose perspective has that approach worked? Has it worked for the dog? Has punishing a dog or alpha rolling a dog who reacts on leash, has that worked for the dog? Has it worked for us? Because now our dog is too frightened to do anything. Same with a home alone dog. If they just decide that barking isn't worth it anymore, has it worked for us? Well, yeah, because we're no longer getting complaints from the neighbors. But the dog is still frightened. Even if the signs of fear are very subtle, then has it worked for the dog? Is the dog any better off at home alone? I do think it's important that we just make sure that what's going on isn't learned helplessness.

And finally, there's a technique that we call flooding. Now, flooding is something that used to be used regularly in dog training. Flooding was where we would take the thing that the dog is scared of and do the opposite of what we do with desensitization. We would expose the dog to a significant amount of the scary stimulus until the dog reaches a point where it goes in theory, oh, okay, that was awful. That was scary, but I survived. Okay, that wasn't so bad. Think of the analogy in humans, because flooding used to be used for human treatment, human disorders, too. And an analogy would be somebody who's frightened of spiders being thrown into a room of spiders with the door locked until eventually they get to a point on the other side of their panic where they say, okay, nothing happened. I didn't die. It was all okay. But here's the challenge. Can you see how that might actually lead to more sensitization? What if you don't reach the point where you go, oh, it's fine. The spiders didn't kill me. I'm okay? What if you didn't reach that point and you just kept panicking and panicking and panicking? There's a good chance that your fear of spiders is now worse. Just as if we were to flood our dogs with their home alone fear, and this was definitely an approach that was used, if we try and flood them with that fear until they reach the point where they go, it's okay, there's a massive chance that we desensitize them. And that's exactly why we don't use this technique in dog training anymore. Now, it is still used in the field of human psychology. It's used for things like PTSD. But here's a big difference between using it on people and using it on dogs. Going through a flooding experience is horrible. It's scary, it's frightening, and it can end up, as I said, making things worse. But if

you've got a human patient in front of you, you can ask the person if they're okay with the consequences. Are you okay with the fact that going? You're going to need to go into a room full of the thing that petrifies you, and you're going to need to stay in that room with no escape until you feel okay. Are you okay with that? And are you okay with the fact that that might not work? We might not get the outcome you want. We might make you worse. Are you okay with that?

You can sign a consent form if you're a human patient. You can be asked that question. But we can't ask our dogs if they are okay to be flooded. Okay, so what? So what if some dogs, a small minority of dogs will get over this by being flooded? What about all the other dogs who for human, it's a horrible experience and they don't get better? And what about the dogs, even if they do miraculously get better after a flooding exposure, what about the process they have to go through to get there? Isn't that a pretty horrible process to put a dog through? And again, I ask the question, who is that working for? If we flood our dogs into feeling better about being home alone, who is that working for? Is it working for us or is it working for the dogs? No, it's working for us.

So just to recap three things that I think could be going on. First, and I hope it's number one rather than number two or three first. It could just be we had a frustrated dog who did need to increase their tolerance of being home alone, but who wasn't panicking and eventually just decides that they're going to get on with being at home without any distraction because, hey, that's just what being a dog means sometimes. Number two, we have a dog who goes into a state of learned helplessness because they just don't know how to escape their panic. Nothing is working. And number three, we flood our dogs in the hope that the overexposure to the scary thing actually makes them okay. So I really hope it's number one and not number two or number three. In any case, if you do want to get your dog over separation anxiety, the absolute best way of doing it is to stop the exposure to the scary thing, stop the scary home alone time, and then gradually, gradually get your dog used to being home alone using Desensitization. If you want to find more about the technique that we use humanely to get dogs comfortable being home alone, check my two previous episodes. That's episode number 23 and episode number 24. Or dive into my Facebook group where you can find a ton of information for free about how Desensitization works.

But that is it from me for this week. I just want to say thank you so much for tuning in again. I do know you have a lot of options for listening and so many podcasts to choose from, so I do so appreciate you listening to mine, and I've got a massive favor to ask. If you like what you've heard today, if you like my podcast, please head over to Apple podcasts and rate and review. I'd be so grateful if you could do that. Okay, that's it. Bye for now, everyone.