

## Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

### Episode 033 Transcript – Are You Really The Problem\_ Separation Anxiety Cause and Prevention

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-33/>

Hello and welcome to another episode of the Fixing Separation Anxiety podcast. I'm your host, Julie Naismith, and I help dogs and owners around the world to overcome separation anxiety so that you can get your life back on track and your dog can have stress-free home alone time.

Okay, let me ask you a question. Has anybody ever said to you that you're the problem? Has anybody suggested that you either caused your dog separation anxiety in the first place or what you're doing is making it worse or you didn't do enough to prevent it? Well, if that's you, you need to listen to this week's episode because I'm going to bust one of the biggest myths of all that you didn't cause your dog's separation anxiety. But more importantly than that, I'm going to spend some time talking about what, if anything, we could, should and might have done to prevent separation anxiety happening in the first place.

This week I'm talking about whether you caused your dog separation anxiety and could you have prevented it. I talk about this topic a lot, particularly that did you cause your dog separation anxiety? And honestly, I don't think I can talk about it too often because I see your comments, I hear what you're saying. You all feel like it's your fault. So I'm just going to keep on banging the drum about the cause of separation anxiety and your involvement in it because I don't want you to feel this way.

All right, let's talk about causing and preventing separation anxiety then. One of the reasons why I wanted to talk about this topic is not only do I see it coming up all the times in my groups and I hear my clients talk about it, but the other day something happened that made me think, oh, that's interesting, because we don't think that way with separation anxiety. Let me tell you what it was. I live in the mountains, a beautiful place to live. I'm very lucky. One of the things that we get in the mountains is a lot of snow. So a few weeks ago, a couple of weeks ago, we had tons of snow, massive, massive amount of snow, but we also had weird wet snow. I won't bore you with the details. Apparently there are people who know this stuff, they're called snow scientists. But those sorts of snow conditions cause avalanches.

Now, we live near the mountains, so avalanches are not cool in town. What happens therefore, is that we get avalanche prevention. Interestingly, avalanche prevention. And what that involves is bombing. So avalanche prevention team drops bombs from a helicopter and the noise creates an avalanche, but it's controlled, so it's preventing an unexpected avalanche. And that got me thinking about two things.

One, first of all, I expected my dog Tex to react to the avalanche bombs because about two years ago he started with thunder phobia from nowhere. He was five years old, he'd been fine,

suddenly started with thunder phobia. So I was expecting him to react to the bombs and he didn't. And I was so proud of him. He started to react to thunder two years ago. I started to respond with some training and some medication, and it seems to have helped him get through it. So that was one thing. And why what's the connection between Texas' fear of avalanche bombs or thunder and separation anxiety? Well, I've told lots of people about his problems with thunder phobia and with avalanche bombs and how much better it's getting. But nobody's ever said to me, well, that's because you or that's because you didn't. And I just thought, well, wait a minute, because my separation anxiety owners, my clients get this all the time. Well, your dog's got separation anxiety because of this, because you did that, or you didn't do this, or you're doing this or you didn't do that, or you're not doing that. But with lots of other behavior problems that dogs get, we don't get the same grief. Yeah, maybe sometimes people will do a little bit of blaming us, but for the most part, we accept that dogs get frightened of things.

They get frightened of loud noises. And it's not necessarily because we are a weak leader or whatever that means. So there was that going through our mind. But then there was also this thing about, really sadly, people do get caught in avalanches and they can take all the precautions they like and they would still get stuck in an avalanche. And we don't go around blaming them if they've taken all their precautions. We just say, what an unfortunate turn of events. So those two things got me thinking, so why do we accuse separation anxiety owners of causing their dog separation anxiety? Why do we do that over and over again?

Dogs fear things. They just do. They might fear going to the vet. Or maybe your dog doesn't like having its nails done. Maybe it's frightened of clippers. Maybe your dog is frightened of being in the car. If you say to your family and friends, oh my goodness, he's developed Roy has developed a really crazy fear of being in the car. I don't know what's going on. I don't know what's happening. Nobody. Well, I hope not. I suspect not. Nobody is telling you it's because you're a weak person or because you gave Roy too much affection, or because you let him go out the door first. They accept he's got a fear of the car. But separation anxiety, no, we don't get the same credit. Nobody cuts us the same slack. I don't know why exactly, I don't know why they blame us so much when our dogs have separation anxiety. Maybe it's because there is that link between us and our dogs and it's relationship based and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I don't know why people are so quick to judge, though, when they have no evidence for us causing separation anxiety in dogs.

Quick refresh. What do we know about what causes separation anxiety in dogs? It can be many things. It could be a change later in life. It could be genetics. We think that's a really big factor. It could be an early life experience. Maybe your dog had a really bad experience when it was a puppy. Maybe its mother had a really bad experience when she was carrying. So there can be lots of reasons why dogs develop fear and why they develop separation anxiety. But the answer is we don't exactly know why. That being said, it doesn't stop anybody from accusing you of causing your dog separation anxiety, particularly all those armchair experts out there. And lots of people will tell you that this might not be their first dog. They may have had a dog before. So if it is relationship based, if it is down to what we are doing, why doesn't somebody end up they have ten dogs in their life, why haven't all ten dogs got separated? Anxiety. It just doesn't make

sense. It's not what we're doing. There's more, way more going on. So people can have five dogs and ten dogs and never act any differently with those dogs, and yet those dogs don't end up with separation anxiety.

But let's then talk about this prevention thing, because I know that's why you're on, that's why you're listening. How do we prevent problem behaviors in dogs? Let's start with that generally. So overall, what do we do to prevent problems developing in dogs? There's three big things that we do, three things we've got in our toolkit.

First, we socialize. So if you've got a puppy if you've had a puppy, you'll remember all the guidance to socialize. What does that mean? It means safely and cautiously expose our puppies, our young puppies, to experiences, to the world in a way that makes them that exposes them and gives them the experience of the world, but doesn't scare them. So socialization is about safe, controlled exposure to the big, wide world so that as they get older and their fear naturally builds because they go for a period where they don't have any fear and then their fear naturally develops. So when that fear naturally develops, they're not suddenly overwhelmed by things they've never experienced or never encountered before.

So we gradually, cautiously, carefully expose them to the wide world. For example, if you have a dog who or if you have a puppy or any puppy to prevent a puppy from being frightened of strangers. When the puppy gets to become an adult dog, one of the best things we can do is get that puppy to socialize with lots of different strange people, people with hats, people with sticks, safely, cautiously, not throwing them in at the deep end and saying, oh, it's fine, he's a puppy. He needs to learn that's not socialization. But that's one of the best things we can do to help prevent a dog becoming frightened of strangers. So socialization is just about exposure.

Then the next thing we can do, number two, we can train them. Of course we can. We can train dogs in anticipation of a problem behavior developing. So if you have a high energy bouncy young dog, then you can train your dog even before they start bubbling people over at the door. You can train your dog that when the door opens, they go to a mat. So we can train our dogs an alternative behavior way before the problem becomes a problem, just expect that your big bouncy dog is probably going to bowl people over when they come in. So let's just train them to do another thing.

When visitors come to the house, the third thing we can do is we can use what we call management, which is basically we stop a dog from being able to rehearse the problem behavior while we're training our big bouncy dog to go to a mat. When visitors come round, we could before they really land or get really solid on the going to mat behavior, we could use a baby gate or we could pop them in a crate. When visitors come round, it stops them rehearsing the unwanted behavior. So we've got socialization, we've got training and we've got management. Stopping rehearsals is really important and it's as important as the other factors too. But how do these three things apply to separation anxiety?

Well, first of all, let's socialize our puppies, our young puppies, to safe home alone time. So things like popping out of sight while you're doing the chores at home or you're cooking, closing doors cautiously and gently on our puppies so that they know we might not always be around. So socialize them. Do natural things that show our puppies that we go, we come back, we go, we come back. Interestingly, in very young children, we're talking about under twos, nine months to two to two years old. Kids that age children that age can develop a form of separation anxiety, which is what is based on a problem of we call object permanence. Sounds fancy, but basically all it means is that when babies develop, they don't know that when things disappear, they haven't disappeared completely. So just because I can't see mummy anymore doesn't mean to say that mummy has vanished forever into thin air. We know that just because we can't see something doesn't mean to say it has gone poof just means we can't see it. There's something in the way.

So you know that game of Peekaboo? We can teach babies that things go and come back using a game of peekaboo peekaboo. And that's a bit what we would do with a young puppy very safely, very carefully. Do some peekaboo type stuff that shows that when we go, we come back, that when things disappear from sight, they haven't gone forever. And then number two, we can do home alone training. Now, this is similar, but it's a bit more structured. You are going to teach your puppy using a very gradual stepped approach to alone time. You're going to teach your puppy that it can tolerate being alone. You might start with out of sight exercises where you gradually build up the time in the house. Or you might head straight for the front door and build up time that way. And if your puppy isn't anxious, it will crack through hormone training in no time at all. And the third thing we can do is manage absences.

Let's not let our puppies, especially our anxious ones, howl and howl and howl and rehearse the behavior that barking and howling is an ends to a means. So let's not let them rehearse home alone problem behaviors. Let's manage it by keeping them calm, keeping them settled, keeping them under their threshold. If they're getting anxious, don't just assume that they're going to be okay. So we can do those three things. If we do all those three things, does it mean we will end up with a dog who is fine on their own? No, it doesn't. I'm so sorry. I wish I could say that it was. Anybody who's got a dog who's frightened of strangers or doesn't like going to the vet anymore will tell you, or not anybody. But some people will tell you. They did socialize their dog, they did take preventative measures to stop that problem behavior. But some dogs are just on a trajectory, they are just on a path to end up with that problem behavior.

And here's the really frustrating thing, especially if you've got a dog with separation anxiety, some people don't do any of these things and their dog is fine. Some people do all these things and their dog isn't fine. And that seems so unfair, doesn't it? But the way I look at it, it's a bit like if you don't want to get a cold in winter, one of the best things you can do is wash your hands regularly and especially not touch your face when you've been near somebody who's sneezing. But washing your hands regularly, they say, the experts tell us, is one of the best ways we can prevent getting a cold. Does it mean we won't get a cold? No, but we might as well give it a go. That's how I look at prevention when it comes to separation anxiety. Does it mean your dog won't get separation anxiety? No, it doesn't. But why wouldn't you give it a chance? Because it

might be the best chance a dog's got of not developing separation anxiety. And even if you do it and your dog still gets separation anxiety, you haven't failed. It just means your dog was probably going to get this anyway.

So never think it's your fault. Never think you failed. It isn't your fault. You didn't cause your dog separation anxiety. But maybe in the future there might be a couple of things you could do that may stop a dog from developing. It not guaranteed, but worth giving it a chance.

Thank you so much for listening to this podcast. I know you've got a ton of options when it comes to podcasts to listen to, so I really appreciate you tuning in. And, hey, if you like my podcast, I'd love it if you head over to wherever you listen to podcasts and you hit subscribe for me. That way you get to know when there's a new episode and if you don't just like to listen, but you kind of like to read, too, don't forget, you can grab a copy of my bestselling book, my five-star rated training guide, *Be Right Back*. It's packed with tons of advice on how to train, how to deal with people in your life who might judge you for what you do. And also it has links to resources that you can download and use real time in training. You can grab a copy at Amazon.

All right, that's it from me. I will see you online soon. Bye for now.