

## Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

### Episode 038 Transcript – Is It True That Quarantine is Bad News for Separation Anxiety

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-38/>

Well, hey there and welcome to another episode of the Fixing Separation Anxiety podcast. This week I want to tackle a topic that I'm seeing a lot of reporting about, and that's whether this whole crazy, exceptional lockdown thing is going to make your dog's separation anxiety worse. You might have read articles about that or seen stuff online, and you might have started to get a bit worried. So I want to make sure, as ever, that I give you the facts and I give you some tips and pointers as to what to do.

So is it true? Is it really true? Is everything that's going on at the moment with you either working from home or being furloughed or the kids being off school? Is all of that likely to make your dog's separation anxiety worse? Or are people just looking for a headline? Are people just trying to find things to write?

Well, today I'm going to give you some insights. I'm going to share with you some science about why actually, yes, this whole situation might have the potential to make your dog worse. Even though lots of people, lots of commentators who I've seen write about this aren't best qualified, they are actually on to something. Every January and every September, I see this very phenomenon. And what goes on in January? What goes on in September? Well, people return to normal routines in January. Many of us have been off for a long period of time, maybe a week, maybe two weeks. We've been with our family. We've had extended family around, we've had friends around. It's been a frenzy of people, and our dogs get used to that. And then we go back to work and it seems like our dogs have forgotten how to be home alone. I see it in September for exactly the same reason. Dogs have had an amazing summer hanging out with you. They've loved the attention, they've loved the company. And then when you go back to work, boom, it's a massive, massive thing for your dog to deal with.

It's not really surprising that dogs prefer being with us than without us. There's so many funny memes, aren't there, at the moment, about how the dogs are all jumping up and down for joy and the cats are all like, when you all getting out of here, this is my space. And there's a little bit of truth in that, because we've spent best part of 30,000 years selecting dogs on the basis of them loving us, on the basis of them wanting to be with us, on the basis of them loving company. So no wonder dogs love being with us. So let me explain what is going on. What happens in January, what happens in September, and what actually might happen when you go back to work and what you can do to prevent issues coming up.

I want to start by just doing a really quick refresher of how we help dogs get over separation anxiety. We use a technique that's called gradual exposure. And the whole thing, the point of gradual exposure is that we are exposing our dogs to the thing that they're frightened of. It's a

technique we use for human phobias. So it's not just dogs who go through this treatment, it's basically a face the fear approach. You face your fear in order to come out the other side. So when a dog doesn't like being home alone, they're not being spiteful, they're not being bad, they're frightened of being home alone. They have a phobia of it. And that's why gradual exposure really helps. We gradually, gradually, using tiny increments of time, teach your dog that being home alone is safe, it's not scary. So we're taking the thing that the dog is frightened of, that's the home alone time. We're exposing our dogs to it, but in tiny, tiny doses, the dose is so small that the dog isn't frightened by it, so the timing.

So for us, with separation anxiety training, the dose is the time alone. If a dog was frightened of people, the dose would be how close to people the dog might be able to get. But for us, we focus on duration and increasing duration in tiny, tiny increments, so that at every step the dog goes, oh, yeah, that was fine, I can handle that. So that's how we help them get over their fear of being home alone. We help them to face their fear. But of course, right now they are totally cocooned from their fears. I mean, 100% cocooned from their fear of being home alone. They're not having any exposure to it. But why would not being exposed to your fear make things worse? Why would dogs not having to face their fear make things worse? Because when we do gradual exposure treatment, we're not exposing dogs to home alone time. That's threatening or anxiety inducing. We take the dose, we take the intensity and we turn it right down. So, yes, they're facing a form of the thing that they're frightened of, but without it being fear inducing. So why would not facing their fear now actually make things worse?

Well, there is something going on, and we see this in human psychology and we absolutely see it in dogs. When we stop facing our fears altogether, when we go into avoidance mode, not only do we not make things better, but it's the avoidance that triggers the fear. We could go through life. If you have a phobia of anything, you could try and go through life avoiding it. The problem is, with most things, eventually you might encounter the thing you're frightened of. If you're frightened of spiders, you can do your utmost to try and avoid living in a damp house that might have spiders, or you might try and avoid seeing any photos of spiders. You might do everything you can and then one day you'll see a spider. It's really hard to 100% control the things that we're frightened of to stop. Maybe if you have a fear of flying, you might decide to never fly again, but most likely you might still fly on holiday. You might just not fly as often as you would like to because of the fear. So yes, we can go through life avoiding fear, but it never makes the fear go away. And the same is true with dogs. So if they constantly avoid their fear, they will not get over it.

The good thing about avoiding fear is we're not inducing horrible, panicky, problematic situations that can actually change the dog's brain for the worse. So don't ever let anybody tell you that stopping your dog having fearful home alone experiences is a terrible thing. It's not at all. And if I had to choose between you being home alone with your dog all the time or you leaving your dog for 8 hours for way longer than your dog could cope with, then you being home with your dog is a lot better for your dog's brain and a lot less damaging to your dog's brain than leaving your dog constantly to go over threshold. What happens though, with the avoidance

scenario is the longer we go without facing our fear at that tiny intensity, at the intensity that doesn't scare us, the more likely we are to react because of the novelty of that fear.

So let's take our dogs who are frightened of being home alone. They have no training, we're not doing that gradual exposure treatment, we are not exposing them to tiny safe amounts of alone time. So the next time they experience it, the contrast is huge, the novelty is massive and it's the novelty that's triggering it's. Almost like our dogs have forgotten what it's like to be home alone safely because they just haven't experienced it enough. And that memory, that ability to be left isn't hardwired into their brain yet. So when they experience it again, boom. That's when they explode. And that's absolutely what I see in January and September. And that's absolutely what you would experience if you went through life trying to avoid something you were frightened of until one day you encountered it again.

So, just to recap exposing our dogs to way too much alone time, to scary, scary, scary alone time really bad for the dog's brain. We get panic, we get phobia coded into the dog's brain, so we don't do that. Our ideal scenario with a dog who has separation anxiety is we gradually expose them to safe amounts of alone time so that they learn that they can be okay. But we do have this weird situation where when we do neither of those two things, they forget what it's like to be home alone. So the next time, even for 10 seconds that they are left alone, they find it really difficult. The contrast is so huge. So you are not going to make your dog's separation anxiety significantly worse because you are home alone with them. You may find that your dog struggles though, when you go back because of this novelty, this contrast issue. But the good thing is there are things that you can do and I'm going to give you some tips. But before I do that, what about normal dogs? So say your dog never exhibited separation anxiety before you went into lockdown. You had one of those dogs that could be left for four or 5 hours a day and was fine. What if you had one of those dogs? Will they develop separation anxiety?

Well, let me take you back to my January September examples. I absolutely do get calls from people who say, I don't know what's happened back in July, my dog was fine, he could be left and now we're back at work and he is losing his mind. He was fine and now he's not. Here's what I think is happening to that dog, to those dogs. More likely than not, that dog either had mild separation anxiety that was undiagnosed before the long period of being with people all the time, or this was a dog that, as a result of early life experiences or genetics, was on a trajectory to develop separation anxiety. A dog who would have developed it anyway. And the separation anxiety gets triggered by that massive contrast of being with you all the time and then boom, you go back to work. So when people say my dog was fine and then two months later my dog is not fine, what I think is going on is these are dogs who were either really mild cases of separation anxiety or were going to get it anyway. They just needed a triggering event. When we come out of lockdown, the truth is, the reality is the vast majority of dogs will be fine. They will be fine, but a good proportion won't be. So what can you do for the ones who are really going to struggle?

Well, you're going to find the best possible alternative to the facing their fear exercise. So if we know that the best thing to do is allow dogs to gradually and safely face their fear, how can we

recreate that when we're in quarantine, when we're in permanent lockdown? Let me give you some examples. Let me give you some things you can do that while they're not exactly home alone training, in some cases they will be good enough to keep your dog in the home alone training game.

First of all, try some out of sight exercises at home so that's you going into different parts of the house where your dog can't see you. You could ideally pair that with a really nice relaxed downstay from your dog. What I want you to make sure here is that you don't just shut doors on dogs and let them scream. Don't shut the door on your dog and let them panic on the other side of the door, even if that's an internal door, because that's not enabling them to face their fear safely. Remember, we want to turn the intensity of the feared thing right down in order for this training to work. So just work on that. And if you need to break it down into stages, do that. It might be that you briefly close the door. It might be that you pull the door towards you, but don't close it. So work out what your dog can do now without panicking, but do try some out of sight exercises.

Then you can try what I call the door is a bore game. This is where we bore the pants off our dogs by going to the main exit door over and over and over until the dog goes, oh, what is she doing? That is so boring. The door is a bore. You're just going to teach your dog that when you go to the door, nothing exciting happens. He's not coming with you for a walk, you're not going out anywhere, nothing to see here. We're actually looking for a response where the dog goes, oh, what is she doing? She's gone crazy. Why is she doing this door thing? And once they start getting that reaction, it means that they're realizing that the door isn't necessarily something to either be worried about or get really excited about. So the door's a bore game.

Then you can work on pre departure cues. This is another thing you can have a go at. When I teach home alone training, I don't use or I don't introduce cues into the training until we've got really nice duration. However, this is an ideal time to just work on cues because you can't necessarily you might not be able to do duration, but you might be able to work on cues. With cues, you're thinking about things that upset your dog before you leave. It might be putting on your coat, it might be getting your shoes out of the cupboard. It might be picking up bags or purses. And you would show your dog, there's nothing scary here, it's fine. And you do that by just gradually remember, keep it gradual, gradually showing your dog that these things are okay. So, for example, if putting on your coat makes your dog freak out, you might just approach the coat hook and repeat that. Then you might take the coat off the coat hook and repeat, repeat, repeat. That way your dog starts to realize that these things that used to be scary are really nothing at all. Bit like with the door is a bore.

It's just showing your dog that these things you know what, they're no big deal. It's all good. But finally, if you can actually get out of the door, if you're allowed to stand on the other side of your door, I know for some people who live in apartments or flats, you're not actually allowed to stand on the other side of the door. But if you can, then you can do full blown home alone training because all you need to be able to do is stand on the other side of the main exit door. And if you can do that, you can do full home alone training. And I tell you what, I really hope that if you can

do full home alone training, that you're making the most of doing that right now. Because the last thing I want is for you to go back to work and say, oh, I wish I'd done more training. I wish I'd taken advantage of that time. Make sure you're not going to kick yourself in whatever period of time when things do start to get back to normal.

So will any of these things guarantee that your dog isn't going to freak out when you go back to work? No, not necessarily. But they are the best chance you've got to make sure that your dog doesn't fall apart. And you don't need to invest a ton of time in any of these exercises. Just a few minutes a few times a week would be fine. It might be tricky. I do understand that for those of you with big families or with housemates, roommates, it's going to be trickier, because what you're going to do, you're all going to go and stand on the other side of the door. If that's you do more of the stuff around the house, do the out of sight, do the going to the door and coming back. And then maybe one day when family are doing their daily exercise, just say, you know what, I'm going to hang back today and I'm going to do some actual home alone training. Maybe do that a couple of times a week. Pair that with a few of the other activities, like the outer sight, like the doors of war game and bingo. You are really going to create some fabulous foundations for your dog.

Okay, that's it from me this week. I really hope that you and your dog are doing okay during this very difficult time and I hope these few exercises will be helpful. The last thing I want is for everything to fall apart for you, and that when everybody else gets their freedom back. After lockdown, your freedom is still restricted by a dog who's freaking out. All right, I'll catch you on the next episode. Thank you so much for listening today. Do stay safe out there and I'll see you soon. Goodbye.