

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 046 Transcript – Why Does Your Training Seem So Up And Down

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-46/>

Welcome to another episode of the fixing separation anxiety podcast. Hi, I'm Julie here, and my goal with these podcasts is to help you through the ups and downs of training, not just from a technical perspective, but also from the emotional side, because separation anxiety training is a roller coaster. And in fact, that's the exact topic that we're talking about today. We're talking about why separation anxiety training seems to fluctuate so much.

What does your dog do fine one day and then seemingly do really badly the next? So stay tuned to find out why I think this happens. I'll explain to you what I think is going on, and I'm going to leave you with my top tip for dealing with those variable times, those times when your dog just doesn't seem to do as well as it was doing.

So what do we mean by fluctuation? Well, really, we're talking about a dog who is doing fine, maybe making some nice progression in terms of target duration. And you're seeing some steady improvement. And then maybe one day from nowhere, your dog just bombs. So not even close to target duration. But it's okay, it's just a one off. So you're going to try again. You'll go back and you'll see if you can get close to some of those previous target durations. But no, your dog's not having any of it. So kind of the first time it happens, the first time you have one of those days, you can just feel a bit flat about it and chalk it down to experience. But it gets really difficult to handle when that goes on, when either you feel like every time you train, your dog can't even get close to what it was doing before, or when you just see this pattern that you feel like you take a few steps forwards only to take a huge, huge leap backwards. So that's what we mean by fluctuation. Just your dog going up and down when it comes to target duration. So when that happens, here are some things that you can do.

First of all, have a look at the trend. Now, if you aren't a whiz when it comes to graphs and charts and stuff like that, don't worry too much. But if you are, let me tell you what you can do. So grab your worksheet and do something called running a trendline. And it's going to differ depending on whether you're on Google Sheets or Excel Sheets. For those of you who don't geek out on data, you can actually do this kind of by eye. So a software program will calculate the trend line, and the trend line is basically saying, okay, we've got all of these numbers, but are they heading in a general direction? We might have ups and downs. But can we see overall that there's a trend? And is that trend up or is it down?

So that's what a trend line is. And like I said, you can get Google Sheets or Excel to work on that for you. But if you're not into fancy stuff like that, and that's fine, just have a look at all your data. And by the way, I hope you are keeping records of all your training, because that is crucial. Whether you're doing that in a worksheet, whether you're doing that with pen and paper, just make sure you're keeping records of your training. So have a look at either the list of times

that your dog's achieved either in your worksheet or on your notepad and just see, does it look like overall my dog is progressing? So even if the last three have been disastrous, do I see that over time the trend is upwards, or is it just a disaster? Maybe for the first few weeks we saw things going upwards, but you're saying, but now all I can see is a downward trend. Chances are you will be having an upward trend. Chances are.

Why? Because we don't push dogs through difficult, scary exercises when we do separation anxiety training. So you shouldn't be having bad session. After bad session, and that means you shouldn't have a downwards trend. If you are if it does look like, say, the last three months, all you've done is trend it down, you need to stop. You need to stop and you need to reset and you need to go back to a time that you're really confident your dog can do and start building that upwards trend again. And don't worry when that happens. I'm going to come on to a bit later in this podcast, the crucial point that every dog who overcomes separation anxiety has more than likely gone through what you're going through now. What your dog's going through now? It's fluctuated.

So don't worry too much when you have to take a few steps back in terms of time, because every single time that you get out of the door, you're adding to the chances of your dog getting over this. And actually, when I say every time you get out the door, I mean successfully. And success means without anxiety. So you're way better to have a shorter duration that doesn't freak your dog out than you are to keep pushing and pushing on challenging durations that your dog can't do, all right? So if you stick to those rules you should see an upward trend. All right, my next tip is when you look at that data, see, I keep going on about all the data you've recorded. So if you are not recording data, I hope this podcast at least makes you do one thing go away and record your data. So when you look back at the data from each training exercise, how many good days did you have versus bad days? Go and have a look at that.

So a good day would be where you at least equal the target duration that you were going to do that day. Now, in my training app, so all of my clients get my separation anxiety training app. And when you have a good day, when you meet target duration in my training app, you get a little high five. Actually, I think it's a poor five. But in other words, what we're looking for is we're looking for the good days being the days when you achieved when your dog achieved what you set out for your dog to achieve that day. And we also want to look at bad days. But overall, if you've trained 30 times or 90 times or 100 times, how many times did your dog meet the target duration and how many times did he not? I'm willing to bet that you've had way more good days than you've had bad days. It's just that right now, in this moment, the bad days seem to, in your mind, be overpowering the good days. So look at the data.

Another thing I want you to do is think about changing behavior more broadly. So beyond separation anxiety. Now, if you've never had a dog with any behavior problem other than separation anxiety, this might be harder for you to understand, but maybe you've got a friend or a family member who's had a reactive dog or a dog who gets scared of things. When we work with dogs to change how they feel, particularly to change their fear to confidence, it's a slow, sticky process that never goes in a straight line. And so if you are trying to get a dog to love

strangers, it will not have a training history where every single session it aced. There will be days when it wobbles. There will be days when it looked like it was going to meet the criteria that were set for it, but it wobbled. That's just the nature of behavior modification.

When we set out to change how a scared dog feels, we will have ups and downs, regardless of whether it's separation anxiety or fear of strangers, or dogs who don't like going to the vets, or dogs who are scared of skateboards. We will have days where the dog doesn't achieve what we thought it could achieve. So it's a really natural occurrence, actually. It's a very natural occurrence in all emotional change, in all subjects. So not just in dogs, in humans, too.

Recovery from things like PTSD or grief for humans isn't a straight line either. If you have ever experienced anything like that, if you've experienced grief or a significant trauma in your life, you'll remember that although it feels like hopefully you make progress, you then hit days where you just think, where does that come from? I thought I was doing so well. I've been feeling so much better and now I just feel so low again. Boom. It just hits you, right? If you've ever had that experience, you'll know what I'm talking about. Or if you've had friends or family who've been through that, you'll see the same.

Grief is a particularly helpful analogy because grief does tend to follow that pattern where somebody recovering from grief will seemingly be in a really good place, progressing. And feeling less weighed down by the grief. Until then, one day, boom, they're completely overwhelmed by it again. So referencing something like other behavior change can really help you normalize what's going on with your dog's separation anxiety. And it might seem a really dramatic comparison to your grief, human grief to a dog's fear of being home alone. But the chemical effect what's going on in your dog's brain is every bit as extreme as a human brain that's dealing with trauma. Your dog is dealing with trauma.

For your dog, being left home alone is a massive traumatic event. So the brain is going to take as long to recover from that as human brains take to recover from the traumas that we encounter. And continuing on thinking about how any brain recovers from trauma, a fundamental rule of recovery is that you have to go slow to go fast. I heard Dr. Karen Overall describe this phenomena as if you think you're not going quickly enough, you need to slow down. So what do we mean by you need to go slow to go fast?

Changing a brain is just a long term activity. It takes a lot of repetition, particularly when we're dealing with negative experiences in the past. It takes a lot of repetition and a lot of new positive experiences to overcome negative ones. It's not really a one to one either. So we might I mean, think about it. How much negativity bias is there in our brain? If you've ever received bad feedback or had something unpleasant happen to you, say you have a day where lots of fun things happen, but something horrid or unpleasant happened in the middle of that day, you will remember that day for the negative thing. Same thing happens with our history of negative emotion. Negative emotion imprints much more strongly on our brain than positive stuff. And so it means we have to have a lot more experience of positive emotion or positive experiences in order to outweigh the negative ones. And the same is true for dogs.

So we have to go slow in order to get the repetition of the positive experiences. Also, going slow means not pushing our dogs too far, not taking them to the edge of their anxiety and just keeping them holding it together all the way through. Because that's one of the surefire ways you can create a meltdown in a dog who's recovering, is to constantly just push them to the edge of their comfort zone when you train until one day they absolutely lose it because of the cumulative impact of being pushed to the edge all the time. What we don't want is dogs who are kind of white knuckling the training. So they're kind of hanging in there. But they are not feeling better about being left. The slower we go, the more positive experiences with no white knuckling we give dogs of being home alone, the better. Our chances of outweighing the historical negative experiences that the dog still has stuck in its brain.

And that brings me on to another guiding principle that we need to think about both patience and urgency. Was she talking about patience and urgency? Those two don't fit together, but they do. So we talked about going slow to go fast. So that's patience. Patience to go at the dog space, patience just to stick with the ups and downs, knowing that they will come. But the urgency part is you have to be urgent in acting.

That means if you're listening to this and you haven't yet started training or maybe you've taken a long break, I want you to be urgent in your desire to get on with the training again. So be urgent in the way you take action about your dog's separation anxiety. However, be patient in waiting for results. So urgency in action, patience in waiting for results. So all of this means all of these points that I've gone through mean you have to do a few things to get through this.

First of all, check your data. If you haven't heard that loud and clear from this podcast, I'm going to say it again. Check your data. And if you're not keeping good records at the moment, please do then keep saying to yourself that all successful dogs will go through this. So all those dogs that you see now, acing 4 hours or 5 hours they have been through this too. They have been through ups and downs. They've caused their owners to despair. Those dogs, you know, the ones that seem like they can just be left without a care in the world. Well, they can now, but they've been through this too. So just remember that when you're feeling like your dog is never going to get through this, if your dog isn't currently on medication, I definitely want you to think about that.

Anxiety medication isn't going to solve separation anxiety. But combined with the training that we do, it's a really powerful combination. Why? Because anxiety medication just helps us have more room to train. We have greater tolerance of the dog, of being alone. So it doesn't mean to say you can put your dog in anxiety medication and suddenly lead them for 3 hours. It might mean you can train for 30 seconds instead of 3 seconds. But honestly, it's enough. What happens is their tolerance of the training goes up, they just are less stressed by it. You can push the duration on more systematically and typically with more consistency. When your dog is on the right medication for them at the right dose. I've got other podcast episodes all on medication, so I'm not going to go into it here. I will link to that in the show notes.

But my number one tip, my number one tip to get you through these fluctuations is to think about this so it can feel like our emotions are not something that we can control. So when our dog is doing really badly in separation anxiety training, we feel flattened. We dread doing another exercise because if they have a bad exercise, it's going to make us feel blue. Well, it's not true that we can't control our feelings or that our feelings are controlled by events. We think that our feelings are controlled by events or consequences. What do I mean by that? Well, that's a great example that if you feel blue because of separation anxiety training, it's because your dog didn't do well.

So the event of your dog not doing well, not meeting target duration, is what made you feel so blue about training that you can't bear to do another step. But actually what's going on is that your thoughts are controlling your emotion. When your dog doesn't do very well, you think, oh my goodness, this is it. Or you think, it's not fair, everybody else's dog seems okay, or this isn't going to work for my dog. I am always going to be stuck in the home, or if I do another exercise, he's going to fail. So I just can't bear to do it. So it's not the event, the activity the consequence that's making you feel that way. It's what you think about them.

Let me give you another dog example. If you've ever had a dog who pulls on the leash, you know how difficult that can feel. So you're on the street, you've got this dog who is pulling you around like crazy. It's quite a busy street and it completely looks like you're being walked by your dog, not the other way around. So you feel embarrassed, you feel self-conscious, you feel judged. However, what is causing that is not your dog pulling on your leash. Your dog pulling on the leash is not what's making you feel embarrassed and judged. What's making you feel embarrassed and judged is that you say, oh, everybody's looking at me. Or oh, you know what, they're talking about me. They're thinking that their dog doesn't do this. Oh, I feel so embarrassed.

So event your dog pulls on leash. Feeling you feel embarrassed, not caused by the event, but caused by the thought that everybody's looking at you and judging you for your dog's doing. What if when your dog pulls on leash, instead of thinking, everybody's looking at me, everybody's judging me, you said, I bet there's some people watching you thinking, oh, gosh, that's my dog too. Or what if you said yourself, I don't think they're really looking at me and judging me. They're just looking at me because I'm walking my dog and hey, it's my dog's cute. They're looking at me because my dog's cute, or they're looking at me because they think it's just a fun scene. They're not judging me. So can you see how the thought of what's going on is causing your emotion, not the event itself?

Let's talk about consequences, emotions and thought in separation anxiety training. So your dog going up and down. You're having good days, you're having bad days, but seems like you are not making that progress that you'd hoped you would on a particular day, your dog doesn't meet target duration. You feel you've had enough, you just cannot do this anymore. You feel worn out, deflated, beaten. But what's causing that, that feeling of just wanting to stop and feeling totally defeated, that feeling of defeat is coming from your thought about the event of

your dog not meeting target. You're thinking, it's never going to work. You're thinking, this isn't it's just not the right training for my dog. You're thinking, I can't do this anymore because it's a waste of time. And it's that thinking, those thoughts that make you feel how you feel. So what could we say instead when our dog doesn't meet target duration?

Well, first of all, you can say write this down. Julie said this would happen. She said it would happen. She said it's normal. Okay, so not my dog's different. It's not going to happen. But Julie said this happens. Now, just as an aside, I am not saying that your dog is definitely 100% going to get over separation anxiety, but I do want you to know that what you're going through when your dog fluctuates, it's really common. In fact, here's another one thing you can say to yourself. Julie says if dogs don't fluctuate when you're going through separation and like you training, she would question whether your dog actually had a fear based problem in the first place. You could also say, oh, he did that a few weeks ago, but we made progress.

Again, you could also say, I have read about people whose dogs get to three or 4 hours. I remember when they said early on their dogs were going through this. So, okay, this does seem like something that would happen. And immediately that you start saying those things, you're going to stop that feeling of defeat and overwhelm and wanting just to crawl away and never do separate anxiety training again. At least I hope you will. I said at the start that I wanted to leave you with a number one tip. If you only do one thing as a result of listening to this podcast. I'm going to give you two things. Because remember, I said if you're not tracking data, you have to do that. But that's kind of an aside.

My tip actually for this whole podcast is think about consequences, thought and emotion. So the next time something happens in separation anxiety training that makes you feel totally rotten, have a look at what you're thinking about that event and say to yourself, can I think about that consequence, that event, in a different way? And I bet you can. And I'll tell you what.

If you can't, then I want you to jump into my free Facebook group or join me on one of my regular Facebook lives. Tell me what your event is, tell me what you're thinking about it, and I'll tell you how to reframe it. So that you don't feel the weight of negative emotion dragging you down. Do we have a deal? Excellent.

Okay. Thank you so much for joining me today. I know you have a huge choice when it comes to listening to podcasts, so I really appreciate you taking the time to listen to mine. So keep training, keep positive, and I look forward to seeing you online or on my podcast sometime soon. Bye for now.