

## Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

### Episode 049 Transcript – The 5 Types of Guilt All Owners Feel - And How to Stop Feeling That Way

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-49/>

As an owner whose dog has separation anxiety, not only do you have to deal with the challenge of having a dog who can't be left and all of the emotional strain that puts on you, you also are saddled with a huge amount of guilt. And guilt isn't always a helpful emotion and quite often it stops us from taking the action that we need to take. So that's why this week I want to talk about the forms of guilt that we experience when we have a dog with separation anxiety. I want to look at whether any of that is at all helpful. And if it isn't helpful, what can we do about it?

I'm Julie Naismith, an ex-people coach turned dog trainer, author and separation anxiety geek. And most importantly of all, I'm mum to recovered separation anxiety dog Percy. But there was a time that I felt hopeless, defeated and trapped by my dog's condition. Fast forward past many failed attempts, lessons learned, research consumed and training sessions done and I now have a happy dog who's over separation anxiety.

Not only that, but I've helped hundreds of dogs and their owners achieve the same. I created the Fixing Separation Anxiety podcast to give you simple actionable, step by step information to help you get your dog over separation anxiety and to help support you through the tough times. If you have a dog you can't leave and you are so ready to change that, so that he can be happy and that you both can get your life back, then you're in the right place. Let's get started.

So first let's talk about what we mean by guilt. Well, guilt is usually a feeling, a feeling of remorse. We feel bad about something, we feel like we've caused offense or we've committed some wrongdoing. Now sometimes that can be real, so we might actually have done that. And sometimes it can just be how we feel. It could just be that we imagine that we did. That really simple way of looking at it is guilt.

Is that really uncomfortable feeling that we get when we have done something that we know to be wrong or when in our heads we think we've done something wrong? And I think that last part is really important when it comes to thinking about guilt in the context of separation anxiety. And guilt can happen because we fail to do something or we think we fail to do something. So we acted in a certain way. We made certain choices. And guilt can also come along when we think we've broken kind of a code of standards. Maybe that's our standards, but maybe it's what we think other people's standards are. Often, the guilt that we feel results from us not sticking with the standards that we think our family, our friends or even society has.

It's just totally normal to feel guilt. We all feel guilty. We all feel guilty at different times because we all make mistakes. None of us are perfect. So it's normal to feel guilty. And it can sometimes be helpful because we all do make mistakes. Guilt can actually be a helpful indicator that helps

us to make positive change. So when we do something wrong and we feel guilty about it, that feeling of guilt can make us change our behavior so that we don't make the same mistake again or we don't make the same negative choices again.

So it can be helpful, but it's often really unhelpful because what guilt does is when it's too much, when we are feeling too much guilt and we can't escape the guilt, we get stuck with the guilt. It becomes unhelpful because what it does is it SAPS our emotional energy. It drains us, it makes us feel flat. And that emotion, that negative emotion, keeps us rooted in what's happened. So we keep going over and over and over what happened, what caused us to feel guilty. And that doesn't make us move forward. In order to move forward, we have to look at taking new action. And it's okay to reflect, is there a really good reason, is it legitimate to feel this guilty about what I did in the past or maybe what I didn't do, or the choices I made, or was it actually beyond my control?

Because sometimes stuff happens and yeah, there's a bad outcome and yes, we were part of it, but it was nothing that we could have done anything about. And feeling guilty about those sorts of things just makes us stay stuck. If we do feel guilty, we need to be thinking instead of beating ourselves up, we need to be thinking about, okay, well, how can I change things? What positive action can I take? So let's think now about guilt in the context of being an owner of a dog who has separation anxiety. Because as I said, there are many ways in which we feel guilty. And it's a pretty heavy weight. It's a burden of guilt that does make us feel like there is nothing we can do and we feel hopeless. I've identified five types of guilt that as a separation anxiety owner, you might have felt you might actually have felt all five of these. But I'm betting you'll have at least experienced one. So let's have a look at what those are.

The first one is probably the biggest one, and I'd be really surprised if you hadn't felt this. And that is guilt that you caused your dog's separation anxiety in the first place. But the thing is, we never actually know, we can't ever truly know the exact reason an individual dog develops separation anxiety. So we don't know that. So you don't know what caused your dog separation anxiety, but you feel guilty about it. And we do know the factors that can contribute to separation anxiety. So maybe we can't pinpoint exactly why that dog there got separation anxiety, but we do know the things that overall contribute to anxiety. And these include what happened to the dog's mother when she was carrying the litter.

So before the dog is even born, then what happens to the puppies almost immediately. So once they are born, what happens in the litter, what happens in terms of what the dam does to the puppies? Then we've got puppy genetics, the dog's genetics and genetics. As we increasingly know, we're finding out that genetics play a critical role in the development of fear, any type of fear in a dog. And then another contributing factor is bad experiences early in life.

So that's a dog being exposed to things that might have been scary or harmful and resulted in a negative association. So that's bad things happening. On the other side of that, there's good things not happening. So the absence of positive experiences, and that typically means a dog who wasn't ever socialized. And socialization is all about exposing typically a puppy, a puppy, to

good positive experiences. So with a growing and developing puppy we need to avoid them having bad experiences and we need to expose them to positive experiences. So if either of those two don't happen, then the puppy risks developing fear as an adult dog or even in puppyhood. So we might say that as an owner, you could have affected or influenced the last two. There's nothing you could have done about the puppy's genetics, there's nothing you could have done about what happened to the puppy when the mum was carrying it. Or what happened in those first few weeks after the puppy was born.

But maybe there are things you could have done if you had your dog by the way, from puppyhood. But maybe there were things you could have done to avoid your puppy having bad experiences early in life and things you could have done to make sure that your puppy had good experiences early in life. But the problem here and why you just can't feel guilty about this, is that no one told you if you did have your dog from a puppy. Nobody was telling you that leaving a puppy who's in a panic to cry out is going to be damaging. And that would be an example of an early bad life experience. So nobody's telling you that. Nobody's telling you either that you needed to have trained your puppy to be home alone.

So giving your puppy positive experiences of being home alone, nobody tells you any of that so how can it be your fault when nobody told you that those were the things you needed to do? In fact, if anything, people are telling you to do the opposite of those things. They're telling you to leave your puppy to cry out. They told you when your puppy first came home that you should ignore its cries. So I can only accept you feeling guilty about those things if you were given very clear instructions and you truly understood those instructions about how to help your puppy avoid developing separation anxiety and you had ignored all of those instructions. But you know what?

Even then, even then, there's no guarantee that if you had done all the right things that your puppy wouldn't have gone on to develop separation anxiety anyway because plenty of people do do those things and their dogs still develop separation anxiety because genetics, what happened before the puppy came home and so on. So you really cannot feel guilty about this one. And for the most part, this guilt this I caused it, it was my fault, stems from what other people are telling us that we're babying our dogs. Your anxiety is being reflected in your dog. You just need to leave your dog to get over it. So when we hear those things, they're immediately guilt tripping us. They're kind of designed to guilt trip us.

Now, our friends and family usually mean very well for the most part, but I guarantee you, if they are saying any of those things to you, either they've never had a dog with separation anxiety. Because seriously, once you've had a dog with separation anxiety, you don't ever tell anybody to let the dog cry out or that it's their fault, or if they did have a dog with separation anxiety in the past and miraculously, the dog got over it. They addressed it by doing it the old-fashioned way, by leaving their dog to panic. And you know what? Sometimes, actually, truthfully, that can work. I cover that in other episodes. But we call it flooding.

Basically, you expose the dog to something it's scared of at full intensity in the hope that the dog gets through that exposure and then goes, oh, what? I survived. Fantastic problem with that technique is it's very risky because it mostly doesn't work and it mostly makes the dog worse. And it's really inhumane because during that panic and sometimes you need to do quite often you have to do repeated panic after repeated panic. So you have to do exposure after exposure and that's pretty crappy for a dog. Meanwhile, they might not recover. So if anybody's telling you that they did leave their dog to get over and it worked, either that dog didn't have separation anxiety or unfortunately, they flooded their dog.

Now, if you feel guilty, if you do feel guilty that you caused your puppies or your dog separation anxiety, even though you know you didn't so rationally, you know that you didn't do this, you have to let go. Worrying about what might have happened to your dog in the past, what you might have done or might not have done isn't going to help. What you need to do is you need to focus on what you can control. All right?

So you need to look forward and say, what can I control? I can't control the past. I can't control what might have happened to my dog. I can't control what I might have done or didn't do in the past. That's done. It's the past. But what I can do you need to say this to yourself, is, I can focus on getting my dog over separation anxiety using training and by suspending absences. That's what you can control. That's what you need to focus on.

All right, guilt type number two. There's the guilt that you're not doing enough. We have this guilt about all aspects of our life, don't we? That we're not working out enough, that we're not working hard enough, that we're not cleaning the house enough, that we're not eating healthily enough, that we're not all of these things that our sock drawer isn't tidy enough. There are again, this comes back to those external standards when we think we're not doing enough. Quite often, it's because we're looking around us and imagining the perfect lives and the perfect existences that everybody has, and it makes us feel inadequate, and it makes us feel guilty. So you can focus on getting your dog over separation anxiety. You can let go of the guilt of whether you cause it or not, but end up feeling guilty that now you're not taking enough action. I need you to know, though, that you are taking action.

For a start, you're listening to a podcast about separation anxiety. That's taking action. That's doing something. And the vast majority of people whose dogs have separation anxiety are not listening to a podcast about separation anxiety. So you are already ahead of the game, and yet you probably are still thinking, oh, but I don't train enough. I'm just listening to the podcast. I'm not actually training. I'm not doing all the things I know that you're supposed to really amp up the enrichment. I'm supposed to play games with my dog. I'm supposed to take them for gazillion sniffy walks and off leash walks every day. Yeah, good. Okay. All of that all of that can help. It's true. But you don't have to do all of it. And even doing some of it is taking action. Doing something is enough. You will never, ever do all the things that you think you should do to help with your dog separation anxiety. And when we feel like we're not doing enough again, we get bogged down with negative emotion. We get that kind of lumpy feeling in our tummy that makes us think, what's the point? I can't do all these things, I may as well do nothing.

So if you're training even just once a week, that's huge. Even if you're just reading a book on it or you're listening to a podcast on it, that is huge. Even if you're not doing any of those things, but you've stopped leaving your dog, that's also taking action. We can always do more in every walk of life. We can always do more. And of course, what do we love doing? We love focusing on the negative. So we love focusing on all the things we haven't done and we focus on all the things we think we should do, rather than just doing something. So the next time you beat yourself up about what you could be doing, what you should be doing.

Remember that with separation anxiety training, most people whose dog has separation anxiety don't do anything. Sadly, they just don't. So, yeah, it's true. If your dog has separation anxiety, you do have to put in an awful lot of training. You do. I'm being totally honest here, nobody gets their dog over separation anxiety without doing lots of training. Now, unfortunately, some people do lots of training and their dog still doesn't get over separation anxiety, but you can't skip the bit, however, the key here isn't to stand. Looking at the top of the mountain thinking about how much training you need to do and how little you feel you are doing what you need to do.

The absolute key thing is just focus on taking the next step. And if that's doing one training session this week, brilliant, that's fine. Or if it's just doing one more enrichment session this week, that's also fine. So focus on that next step and then take the next step. See, what you're going to do is you're going to climb to the top of the mountain without ever looking at the top. Because as with any big undertaking, whenever we try to take on a big change and separation anxiety training is a big life change, we have to do something that previously we weren't doing at all and we have to suspend absences. But whenever we're doing anything like that, if we look to the top of the mountain, all we can see is a flag at the top that says overwhelm. So do not look at the top of the mountain, just look at step by step by step.

So this week, train once, give yourself a really easy goal. I'm just going to train once. And you know what? If you achieve that, you'll get a little bit of a buzz and maybe you want to train twice. However, if you say to yourself, okay, I listen to this podcast and she said that I've got to do loads and loads of training, so, oh my goodness, I'm going to train seven times this week and it gets to Tuesday and you haven't trained at all. So then you go, oh, I might as well give up. It's a phenomenon in psychology which is basically meet goal or quit. So when we set really tough goals and we quickly realize that we're not going to get there because the goal is so tough, we quit. It's just how our brains work. However, when we set an easy goal, what can happen is we chalk off that easy goal, we get a buzz and we feel motivated to do another one brilliant. So we can always do more, but know that whatever you're doing right now is enough, and anything else you do is a bonus.

And the third type of guilt that if you haven't felt yet, you probably will, is guilt that you didn't start early enough. So you should have started all this training. You should have started working on a drug separation anxiety sooner. We never like to give ourselves a break, do we? As humans, we're very, very good at beating ourselves up. So even if after you start training, there's a really good chance that you're going to give yourself a hard time that you didn't start sooner, or if you

did start sooner, you might say, yeah, but I tried all the wrong things. Why didn't I start this particular training sooner? This gradual exposure that I know works, why did I try all those things?

So you're either going to beat yourself up for not doing anything, or you're going to beat yourself up for having done the wrong things. And I do wish that someone had told you as soon as your puppy or your dog came home that you should have started homeland training. I wish that, but I bet nobody did. So again, how can you feel guilty about something that nobody told you to do? You probably had no clue that your dog might need to learn to be alone, because nobody tells you. Everybody tells you dogs are fine on their own. Remember that most dogs don't love being alone. Some dogs hate it and they panic. But most dogs don't love it. And when your dog comes home or your puppy comes home, you're so busy with the house training, the classes, the manners, the leash walking, the socialization, that no wonder you're not thinking about teaching your dog to be happy home alone. And anyway, as we know, you could have done all that and still had your dog develop separation anxiety.

And some people get really lucky and don't do home alone training, and their dog is fine. So no wonder you didn't do more sooner. But the thing is, that doesn't matter. None of that matters now. What matters is you're addressing it. You're addressing it from now on. And as the saying goes, the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is today. And it's the same with separation anxiety training. Of course, day one, the day your dog or puppy came home would have been the absolute best day to start home alone training. But today is a pretty good second best.

All right, guilt type number four. There's the guilt that you made it worse. So retract let's just go back a second. Let's think about what we know about separation anxiety and what causes it. Well, many things. And we don't exactly know for each dog. And those things that cause it, some of them can make it worse too. So the number one thing that we have control over that can make a dog worse is leaving a dog for longer than that dog can cope with. So leaving a dog in a panic. And if your dog does have separation anxiety, then you would not be alone. If you had not left your dog for longer than it could cope with. I don't think there's an owner of a dog with separation anxiety out there who hasn't at some point left their dog for longer than their dog could cope with. For the most part, it's because we don't know. So before we realize that our dog has separation anxiety, we've left them, everybody's done it. So if you've done it, no guilt about that. We've all done it and we didn't know. But of course we do feel guilty about it, because no one wants to feel that they left their dog in a panic. But you're not walking out of the door. You didn't walk out of the door saying, I'm going to teach my dog a lesson. I'm going to teach my dog to get over it by just screaming its heart out. I know it's in a panic. You didn't do that.

The only reason that you've ever left your dog for longer than it could cope with is you didn't know any better. Nobody told you. You thought that that's normal and that that's how dogs are and they get over it. Or you had one of those emergency situations. You were absolutely on top of managing absences, but then your car breaks down on the way home, or your dog walker

calls you and leaves a message while you're at work to say they've had an emergency and they've had to drop your dog off earlier. Or you have a personal emergency and you're horrible to think about it, but you're heading to the emergency department, so stuff will happen. But that doesn't make you a bad owner. In fact, guilt makes you a good owner. You see, I think that's what differentiates people who truly care and those who truly don't.

Guilt is usually a sign that we care about something, and if we don't have any guilt about it, it's because we don't care about it. So if you feel guilty for all the times that you left your dog, and now you know, looking back, they were in a panic, it's only because you're an amazing owner. When I wrote my book, *Be Right Back*. One of the things I put at the very start of the book is I dedicated it to Percy and my other dogs, but particularly Percy, and said that I wanted to say to Percy, just, Percy, I'm sorry. And thank you for forgiving me, for leaving you for all those times when I didn't know you were upset, when I didn't know you were scared. And even now that brings tears to my eyes just thinking about it. But I didn't know, I didn't leave him thinking he was in a panic. I left him thinking he was okay. And actually, when those family emergencies do come up, those are the most difficult things because leaving your dog, not knowing they're in a panic, and then finding out later that they're in a panic is hard enough. But leaving your dog knowing that they're in a panic, that's crushing. That's why we don't do it.

The thing about guilt and actions that we do or that we don't take is that you'll often hear people say, well, hang on a minute. Ignorance is no defense. But you see, I think when it comes to having a dog in our lives, I think it often can be because especially when you are somebody who reads all the books and gets the advice and hires a professional. I think ignorance in that situation is a defense because you have put your trust and your faith in somebody who should know better. You've even paid them to give you advice. So if you've been given crappy advice by somebody who should know better, they're the guilty ones, not you. Trainers should know better. They absolutely should know better.

But sadly, the problem is many of them don't. They either don't want to invest in learning or they've been working with dogs for 30 years and it's always worked. So why would they change now? But in a professional, ignorance of the basics of the profession is totally inexcusable. If you're a lawyer or a doctor or an accountant, you can be sued for malpractice, for not following the code. But dog trainers don't have that risk. Dog trainers can do what they want. They can take your money, they don't have to keep up to date on knowledge, and they can give out bad and potentially damaging advice. And on top of all that, they make you feel guilty about it. So no more guilt on this one. The past is the past. You haven't made it worse. You're taking action and that's what's going to make it better.

And finally, guilt about your family and friends. And this one is tough because when you have a dog, you can't leave. All sorts of tensions arise with your friends and family. And I know they don't necessarily mean to, but they do judge us, they do give us unsolicited advice because suddenly everybody's an expert, aren't they? And of course they feel frustrated when we turn them down because we're always saying no to stuff. No, sorry, no, no, I can't get anybody to look after the dog, especially the last minute things or the you know, what you doing this

weekend kind of thing. So they feel frustrated and I think we would too. In their shoes, we probably would feel the same and then we end up being caught between wanting to do what we know is the right thing for our dog, which is do the training and suspend the absences. But then also we have, I guess a sort of sense of duty to our friends and family. But it's not just duty. We want to be with them. We miss them too. So they miss us. We miss them.

What I want you to remember, though, is they will cope. They will cope. Most of them will cope. It's not forever. And I bet that you are not cutting ties with them. You're just finding different ways to interact. And all you're asking for is just that bit of patience and understanding and your true friends and your family really will get that. And I know as well that you aren't saying no to everything. You're prioritizing. That's all. You can't do as much, but you do the things that really matter, that matter to you and that matter to them. And you're investing your precious money, the money that you spend on daycare, the money you spend on sitters, you're just choosing where to spend that so you can't do everything you used to. You spend your money on daycare and sitters more wisely so that you can do some stuff with your family. You just can't do all the things that you used to be able to do for now. So it's just their disappointment.

Remember that when they make you feel guilty, it's just because they miss you. They want to spend more time with you. They want you back in circulation. They're not meaning to guilt you. So do let go of this guilt because it's not forever. You will be back in circulation soon. And then there's a guilt about medicating your dog. And this is a really reasonable guilt, I think, and pretty common. The reason I say it's reasonable is because the society stigmatizes the use of anxiety medications as a whole. Not just in dogs, especially in dogs, especially stigmatized in dogs, but it's stigmatized in people, humans, adults, children.

So it's not a surprise, really, is there, that there's so much stigma about medicating your dog. Now, you might think, it doesn't matter what society says, I actually don't think this is the right thing to do. You might have some personal standards that say this is unethical. Maybe you're feeling guilty because you think there's side effects. If putting your dog on anxiety medications does seem to go against your standards, ask yourself, why is that? Why do I think that I shouldn't do this? What is it about my standards that say I shouldn't put my dog on anxiety medication? And is it truly, is that truly what you think? Are those really your standards? Or is it that influence the external influence and then challenge yourself, why is it wrong? Is it just something that we don't do? Or is there some really concrete reason? Do you have good evidence that putting a dog on anxiety medications is wrong?

The thing is, anxiety medications are safe for dogs for the most part. There are side effects, and you definitely want to talk to your vet about that. And for some dogs, they're not right because they aren't safe. But for most dogs, vets will tell you anxiety medications are safe and they can help stave off a lifetime of chemical imbalance in the brain. And that chemical imbalance, that's not good for dogs. If for whatever reason, anxiety medications go against your principles, and by the way, they definitely used to go against mine. I was probably the most anti-medication dog owner you could meet. But now I see the other side of it.



I see the change they bring about. I see the relief they bring. I see the reduction in stress that they bring about and the increase in quality of life. I saw it in my own dogs and I've seen it in client dog time after time after time. So I'm definitely convinced I've changed my mind about it. But if you're still feeling bad, just remember that if you then decide to put your dog on medication despite the fact that you think it's not wrong, you're being amazing. You're doing an amazing thing for your dog. And you should feel proud of yourself because you're being selfless. You're putting your dog's needs first.

As you can see, there are many ways in which we can feel guilty about our dog's condition or the way we're addressing it, but none of these are really helping us. What you need to focus on is not what's happened in the past or emotions related to what you might or might not be doing, what you should be doing, what you shouldn't be doing. You just need to focus on what's actually going to help your dog overcome separation anxiety and therefore what's going to help you get back to your life. And that's gradually exposing your dog to alone time, using Desensitization training, by stopping your dog from being scared, by suspending absences and just taking that first step. And whenever you feel stuck and whenever you feel guilty, just take another step because it's amazing how action can help us overcome sticky emotions.

Okay, that's it from me for this week. Thank you so much for listening. I know that you have a ton of options when it comes to podcasts, so I truly appreciate you taking the time to listen to mine.

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