

# Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

## Episode 052 Transcript – Could Training Be Making Your Dog Worse

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-52/>

Did you ever wonder whether what you're doing might be making things worse? So the training that you're using, is that making your dog worse? Do you find that the more you train, the more your dog is stuck to you like glue? Do you find that the more you go in and out of the door and try to do absences, the more alert your dog is to you going. Well, here's the thing, sometimes that can happen.

Sometimes when we do separation anxiety training there can be some quirks that cause the training to not go as we planned. And rather than making our dogs better, we actually risk making them worse. That's why in today's episode I'm going to explain to you how that can happen, but also I'm going to explain to you how to avoid it happening and what you can do if you think that training has been making your dog worse.

I'm Julie Naismith, ex people coach, turn, 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 time. 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.

Okay, so you're training away, you're doing everything you can, you're following the rules, but you don't even ever seem to make any progress. Or if you do, it's really spotty. And what you're noticing is the more you train, the clingier your dog gets. Which is completely the opposite of what we expect to happen. So you might be scratching your head thinking, what on earth is this? My dog feels worse than when I even started.

So what's going on? Well, let me first explain what the training that I teach does. What's the standard approach to getting a dog over separation anxiety? And let me explain how that works. It's a process that's called desensitization and it's based on the empirical principles of how any brain, human or dog, adjusts and recovers from something that it's frightened of.

It's a technique that's known in the human world, the human world of psychology as exposure therapy. And it consists of taking the thing that causes the fear and then exposing the subject to that fear. So if you're frightened of cats, you've got a phobia of cats. What we would do is ask you, what's the smallest or safest aspect of being with a cat that you can handle? Can you be in a room with a cat but not touch it? Or is that too scary? Could you be in a room looking out of the window to the garden at a cat? Would that be okay? We're trying to find an intensity of the thing that scares you at an intensity that's not scary.

Do you see what I mean? So the cat next to you, if you're frightened of cats, might be way too much. But if you were frightened of cats and I said to you, okay, but what version of having a cat around could you cope with? What's the lowest intensity that we can find? How can we turn that down so that you now feel comfortable with a cat around? And if you are frightened of cats or other animals or something else, you might say with the cat example, you might say, I couldn't be in the room with a cat, and I couldn't look out the window at cat, but I could probably look at a photo of a cat on a computer. So, yeah, I could do that. So that's where we might start. We've basically turned the intensity right down.

On the scary thing, the cat, the fear of the cat. But we're still exposing the subject, the sufferer, the phobia sufferer to the cat. It's just a dialed down, lower intensity version of cat. It's a photo of a cat. And then as the subject becomes more comfortable with the cat, with the photo, we might then say, okay, what would be the next step you could cope with? And they might respond that it could be a video of a cat, maybe with some meowing thrown in. And we continue to expose the subject to different levels of the scary thing, but we're dialing it down each time.

So each time, at each step, in what's called the hierarchy of fear, the thing isn't scary. The intensity is so low at each of those steps that the subject isn't scared. They're exposed to the thing. They're exposed to the thing that typically induces fear, but at such a level that they're not scared. And you can see what happens. You have a subject who's frightened of something they're facing, facing that fear, but aren't scared. They start to learn. Their brain starts to say, oh, wait a minute, it's okay. That thing that I'm scared of, I actually can handle that.

So of course, with dogs, it's alone time that's the scary thing. And when we get a dog comfortable with being home alone, we are dialing that intensity of home alone time right down. And we do that by reducing the amount of time that the dog is alone. So we take a tiny, tiny amount of alone time to start with. For most dogs, that is seconds. For lots of dogs, it's not even going out of the door. It's you working on the door. So we've dialed down that intensity. We've reduced the fear inducing stimulus to such a small amount that it's no longer scary to the dog. So it handles that alone time because it's so tiny and so dialed down.

So how on Earth, if we do this, how on earth are we making the dog worse? How could you possibly be making your dog worse if what you're doing is sticking to the rules, exposing your dog to a tiny, tiny intensity of scary alone time, so low, such a low intensity, so short that it's not actually scary.

So how is that going to make your dog worse? Well, think about what we're doing. We're using an approach that is basically face your fear. In fact, some people call it a face your fear approach.

So we have to expose the subject, the learner to the thing that it's scared of, and that for the dog is home alone time. So we are exposing our dogs to home alone time in order to help them get over their fear of home alone time. So where it can go wrong is if we get that intensity wrong, if we muck things up and expose our dogs to too much alone time, it's too long, it's too intense, it's more than the dog can cope with, then the opposite of what we're trying to achieve happens.

And in fact, that's usually how fear gets on board. If a dog, a subject, a human, whatever, is scared of something, the fear can grow when they're exposed to more and more and more of that scary thing. So back to the person who's frightened of cats. If they were locked in a room with 50 cats, they would most likely kind of depends, but more often than not, they'll come out feeling way worse about cats. And that process is called sensitization. We've got desensitization, which is face your fear, the gradual exposure to the thing that you're scared of, gradual exposure of the dog to alone time.

In the case of separation anxiety, training, desensitization, facing your fears, exposure therapy, sensitization, increasing fear, the subject becomes more and more fearful of the thing that it was scared of in the first place. It can be in lots of instances, it can be a fine line. We can, on the one hand, be making great progress. The dog is getting exposed to tiny amounts of alone time, and it's going, whoa, okay, that was fine. The dog could handle that. That's not like it used to be. Yeah, you went out, but you came back. The bit in between, that was fine. It could have been 2 seconds, but we build on those 2 seconds. We build on it.

So that's the process working. That's desensitization, that fine line is if the dog, your dog, if their dog can't handle the time that it's exposed to, we are going to see some sensitization. The challenge, of course, is how much is too much? How long is too much for the dog to cope with? And it's not always easy to tell. Well, they can't tell us. So we've only got body language to go with. And as you know, you might have one of those dogs where it's actually really difficult to read them.

They're not exploding, they're not barking, howling, whining. They are showing more subtle signs of anxiety or fear and those ones can often be tough. There's a general rule, though, if you find when you're doing this training where you're gradually exposing your dog to increasing amounts of alone time and they are getting more and more agitated about you leaving, they're starting to follow you around the house more, they're more vigilant, they're kind of on guard, they're alert to everything you do.

If you find that's happening, even if when you're doing the training, you're not seeing your dog upset you're not seeing your dog explode or cry or scratch if you think or if you observe that your dog seems to be getting more tense and more on edge about you leaving. The chances are that you've just crossed over that line and you are unwittingly pushing your dog a bit too far.

So if that's happening to you, if you're in this place right now and you're finding that it's completely the opposite to what you want to achieve, what can you do? You dial it back, you take it much easier. So if you're on a duration, let's say, of 30 seconds, you're going to stop trying those 30 seconds absences, you're going to go right back. And I would always suggest going right back if you're seeing sensitization, we want to nip that in the bud really early and get back to giving your dog some easy wins. So you go and you come back and it's easy and there's no issue. And no worry and no stress.

So the first thing you can do then is you're going to dial back the duration that you're on. Number one, if you're not on absences at the moment, if you're still working on the door using my game, the door is a ball game, then go back and work on the previous step. Or the previous step to that. So wherever you are, whether you're on duration or whether you're on door as a boar, you go back. You go back a step. So going back is going to be immensely helpful. And it always feels crushing when you go back because it feels like you are never going to get there.

Oh, my goodness. If I keep going back all the time, how am I ever going to make progress? Will you make progress when your dog has an experience of being home alone? That is good. So every time your dog has a good experience of alone time, that's in the bank. If it has a bad experience or kind of holding it together, hanging in their experience. We don't want that.

So going back actually is helpful for the cause because you get back to having more positive experiences. You're banking them so that you can progress forward again. And with separation anxiety training, you really have to go slow to go fast. You cannot rush this. Rushing it is one of the big causes of sensitization because we're so desperate to move on. And especially when you're starting out and you're on really low durations, it can seem like if you did the math, it's taking you two months to get this 3 seconds, and you're like, well, hang on a minute, this isn't going to work.

It's going to be ten years before we get there. But it doesn't work like that. You're in those early stages where you're going out for really short durations. You're working on the foundations. It's tiny, tiny changes that you probably can't see in your dog that ultimately add up to progress. So no, you're not going to go up a second a month. That's not how it works. But at the start you will spend a lot of time on really, really short durations. Over and over and over.

The first thing you're going to do is dial things back if you think your dog is being sensitized by the training. So you go back a step, indoor as a boar, or you reduce the target duration. The second thing you're going to do is try training less. If you're one of those crazy atypes and I know a lot of you are, that's why you listen to this podcast. That's why you're desperately working so hard to get your dog over this. You can do too much. You can train too often. You cannot give yourself or your dog a rest. So the second thing you can do is just have a little bit of a break.

If you normally take the weekend off, take three or four days off. If you normally take one day off, take two or three days off. So however long you normally break for between training sessions, take a bit longer. So that's the second thing you're going to take a break.

The third thing you're going to do is actually look at how you carry out the exercises. So you might want to give more time between the steps. Some dogs do way better when you increase the amount of time between the steps. Although, interestingly, some dogs do worse with more time. You're going to have to play around with that with your dog, but play around with how you structure the exercise. If you need more time between steps, take it.

You can also split the exercise up. So if you're working on a short duration and you're following the training plans in my book, you might be on say, eight steps or ten steps. You can chunk those up. You could do three steps together, take a break, go and have a cuppa, come back half an hour later and do the next few steps. So you can break up the exercises, if that's helpful. So looking at the structure, looking at how you train is the third thing that you're going to do.

And the final thing you're going to do is don't panic. It's okay. The fact that you are asking yourself if your dog is doing worse is really, really good because it means you're on it. It means you are observant. It means you are really noticing how your dog responds to training, and that is absolutely priceless. I always say you don't need to be an expert in separation anxiety to get your dog over this, but you do need to be an expert in your own dog. And if you're noticing these subtle changes, you are absolutely on top of this.

All right, so my four tips, you there, please don't worry. This isn't terminal. You can turn this around. You can get back to progressing ahead again. You can stop your dog from sensitizing. If you think that's what's happening, it's all good. Just follow these four tips and take it from there.

All right, thank you so much for tuning in today. I really appreciate you taking the time to listen because I know you've got a ton of choices when it comes to podcasts. If you like what you've listened to today, I'd love it if you could rate and review the podcast.

Remember that when you rate the podcast, that's going to show it to more owners of dogs with separation anxiety and it will help more owners of dogs with separation anxiety because they find the podcast. So you'll be doing them a huge favor and it would be great for me to know what you think about the podcast too. Okay, I'll leave it there and hopefully I will catch you on the next one. Bye for now.