

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 057 Transcript – When Myths Become Truths

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-57/>

Some things that really annoy me include running out of oat milk, especially running out of oat milk first thing in the morning when I'm just wanting to pour it onto my measly. I'm not mentioning any names here, but you know who you are when you get to the oat milk before me.

Another thing that drives me a bit bonkers, off leash dogs that charge unleash dogs. Hands up if you've got a dog who, when he's on leash, when he or she's on leash, doesn't love it when an off leash dog who apparently is friendly comes charging at them. The third thing that really, really gets to me and actually I don't get and it sounds like I'm a really angry, annoyed person, I don't, I don't get that angry. But there are some things that really rile me.

And the third thing that really gets to me, it's the myths that surround separation anxiety. And I seem to spend so much of my time having to deal with statements that people make, believing that they're factual when it comes to separation anxiety, but are actually just not. They're so far from the truth, they're made up, they're nonsense. And it's clear I'm always going to have to keep talking about the myths in separation anxiety. They're never going to go away.

So here I am again today, talking once again about separation anxiety myths. But I'm going to do something slightly different today because I want to dive into why do myths get formed in the first place? Why do we have this need to create myths when for the most part we can find information that's based on facts or truth? So that's what this episode is all about.

Hello, and welcome to the Be Right Back separation Anxiety Podcast. Hi, I'm Julie Naismith, dog trainer, author, and full-on separation anxiety geek. I've helped thousands of dogs overcome separation anxiety with my books, my online programs, my trainer certification, and my separation anxiety training app. And this podcast is all about sharing my tips and tricks to help you teach your dog how to be happy at home alone too.

So the other day I was scrolling through my free Facebook group and I saw a post, a really quite common post. Hear this statement a lot and it went something like, I just don't know what to do. I feel so confused. There's just so much conflicting information, it's hard to know what I believe. And I felt this person's pain because I certainly remember that feeling ten years ago when I first discovered my dog couldn't be left.

It's like head scratching. There's so much out there and so much that does seem to be at odds. You'll read one piece that says do one thing, and then somebody else or something else will say, do

exactly the opposite. But here's the thing, there's a difference between conflicting information and conflicting facts. There is a ton of information out there about separation anxiety. There's plenty of advice and lots of that advice is, it's true, it's conflicting.

But the reason that that advice is conflicting is that people are giving that advice based on their opinion, based on something that they believe to be true. But which actually, if they took the time to dive into the research to look at the evidence, it would become clear is not a fact, it's actually a myth.

So how do we end up there? How do we end up with separation anxiety, which is the most researched behavioral problem in dogs being swamped by so much misinformation? Why do these myths ever take on the credence that they take on? Well, today I'm going to go through not just how separation anxiety myths develop but how myths develop in general, why we need them, and why we so often rely on myths to help us find our way through information.

The first big reason that you'll see myths developing is that when a piece of information is taken and then gets repeated over and over again without challenge. So you hear it so often that it must be true because your brain subconsciously, you don't know you're doing this, but your brain subconsciously is going, well, I hear this over and over and over. So it must be true. Everybody's saying it.

A great example in dog training is the Alpha myth, the leisure myth. If you don't know what this is, well, I'll tell you about it, but just like I'll tell you and then erase it from your memory, it's all about the fact that we need to, as humans, dominate air quotes, you can't see them, but dominate dogs in order for dogs to understand what we want them to do. So dogs are clueless and they're lost and they are determined by the way, according to the Alpha myth and the leadership myth, to take over, to dominate us.

And that's so this is how the leadership myth goes, that's why they develop behavioral problems. So what we need to do isn't train them, isn't undergo behavior modification, we just need to show them who's boss. Well, so many trainers and people in the dog world and people outside of the dog world have talked about this for so long that there's an assumption that this is a thing that dogs are trying to dominate, that we have submissive dogs and we have dogs who want to dominate us.

That we have dogs who need to be top dog and who need to be top dog in a pack, which includes us. But it's just not like that. There isn't evidence to suggest that when your dog wants to sleep on your bed, it's because it wants to dominate you. There's nothing, nothing that says when your dog wants to go out of the door first, it's because it's trying to be your boss. Your dog wants to go out of the door first because doors are really exciting and you're being really slow and there's plenty, plenty that's been written debunking the alpha and leadership myth.

So I am not going to go into it here. If you want to research it, dive in and type debunk leadership myth in dog training or debunk the alpha myth you'll find plenty of resources. The point I'm making though is you might be listening to this thinking, well I always thought that was a thing. And you wouldn't be alone because everybody says it. So if everybody says it, this myth starts to feel like a fact.

Now linked to that another reason why a piece of information that isn't true, that is groundless takes off as fact. So myth turns into reality is when that information or that statement gets repeated by people with credibility. Only today I was reading something that was across all the newspaper about somebody tweeting social media's got quite a lot to play in propagating myths because it allows people to repeat information that might not be true and it allows people with credibility quotes credibility to make statements widely.

So social media does have a lot to play in this. Anyway, I digress but I was reading something today, somebody had tweeted something about the coronavirus vaccine and how it had affected somebody in her family and then she'd had a number of scientists speak out and say, but that's not true. But the thing is that information is now out there. It's getting repeated over and over without challenge because that information is getting shared and it's getting repeated by people who have a large social media following which in this day and age is akin to credibility. The larger your following, the more credible you are seen to be.

In separation anxiety training, one of the things that I see get repeated by people with credibility, which is actually a myth, is that we should use food in training. And often it would be I often hear vets say this, I hear lots of dog trainers say this, that what we need to do is leave a calm for a dog or give a dog a treat when we go out because that's how we're going to get our dog to be okay with being alone. If you've ever tried this, you'll know it doesn't work.

There's a variety of reasons why it doesn't work, but you may well have experienced this yourself. In fact, a lot of people come to me having tried this method and realized that at best what happens is you get a dog who's okay for as long as the food lasts and then once the food is gone, the dog melts down. The dog isn't actually learning to be okay on its own, it's being distracted by the food.

But very credible sources will tell you that this is the solution, not this is an aid, not this is something that might help, but this is the solution to separation anxiety and so we believe it. It's not a myth to us, it's a truth. Why wouldn't it be a truth if credible people say it over and over? A third big reason why a myth takes on the life of a fact is if it's the first thing that people hear. So our brains just have a way of attributing weight to information, to data, to learning that we come across for the first time.

We just do that. You can probably think of things all through your life where the first time you hear something, it kind of sticks. And then we have to unlearn that. Now, in separation anxiety, the classic example of this is that when your dog first started struggling, I bet one of the first pieces of

information or first pieces of advice you were ever given is you need to let your dog cry it out. For the vast majority of us, it's probably one of the first bits of training quote advice that we're given about getting our dogs over separation anxiety. So it kind of starts to feel sort of like it must be true.

And as well as being one of the first things we hear, it gets repeated over and over. So parameter number one gets met, it gets repeated by people with credibility. So that's number two. And it's the first thing we hear as well. So we hear it, it gets repeated over and over by friends and family, by trainers that we meet, and it gets repeated by people with credibility. Trainers, possibly vets? Possibly. So of course it seems like it must be true. We don't challenge it because it just seems like it must be a fact.

The fourth reason why myths can take on a life of their own is because in itself, it just seems to be sensible. There's something about it that seems reasonably plausible. So a statement is made and you hear it and you think, oh, yeah. Kind of oh, yeah, I kind of see that.

Again in the separation anxiety context, the classic one here is, well, you need to crate your dog. When you go out, your dog is upset, so you need to put your dog in a crate because dogs like to den. Oh, yeah, and I can see that. Yeah. Because dogs it does seem like they need to snuggle, doesn't it? And they do seem to like kind of really cozy spots. So if I put my dog in a crate, close the door, I'm creating a safe space. If you've tried this with a dog who's in a panic when you leave, you'll know that their results are horrendous.

I've seen all sorts of awful outcomes from dogs who've been imprisoned let's tell it how it is. Imprisoned in their panic. Such distressing scenes as well, things like dogs who defecate everywhere because they're panicking, dogs who try to escape, dogs who hurt themselves. And by the way, don't listen to anybody who says that so called indestructible anxiety crate is the solution. All that does is it imprisons a dog even further in its panic. And even if this so called indestructible crate stops the dog from physically harming itself, the mental damage done by imprisoning that panicking dog is huge.

But as an aside, lots of dogs still hurt themselves in indestructible crates. But it seems to make sense. Dogs like to snuggle, so why wouldn't they seem better in a crate? Well, because they feel trapped. Think about it this way, if you love your home, it's your haven, right? So if you love your home, it's a nice feeling. When you come home from work, if there was a massive thunderstorm on outside, you'd probably feel better snuggling up on the sofa at home than being out in a thunderstorm.

However, if the house was on fire, if your apartment set fire and somebody locked the door on you, how are you going to feel about your safe haven then? Would you feel cozy? Would you feel like you want to be there? Or would you go into a blind panic, desperate to escape? So, massive difference, thunderstorm outside, you choose to be at home, you choose to snuggle because it

feels like that's where you want to be and it feels safe. And you feel protected. A fire starts up in your home, the last thing you want to do is to be trapped in your home with the door locked, not being able to escape.

So, yes, create a cozy space for your dog when you go out, that's absolutely fine. But the way to make sure that your dog doesn't panic in its crate when you go out, aside from doing separation anxiety training, it is to keep the door open. Just let your dog decide if they feel better being in a crate when you go out, then leave the door open so that they can decide when they want to go in and they can decide when they want to go out. Don't imprison them in their crate.

Now, I'm really pro crate for lots and lots of situations. I teach all of my separation anxiety heroes, or I talk to my separation anxiety heroes about a crate training plan. Which gradually gets a dog to love its crate. So let's get dogs loving their crate, loving snuggling down in their crate, but let's not make them prisoners in a crate when they're panicking. Fundamentally different. Fundamentally different. So, massive, huge myth crating does not get a dog over separation anxiety. For the most part, it makes things worse.

All right, let's dig deeper into this myth thing. Another reason why myths take hold is that they can be very broad generalizations that kind of have a nugget of truth, so they're not completely false statements in the separation anxiety context. The one that I would highlight here is getting a second dog. You heard that one. You thought about that one. We've all heard that one, right? You might have even tried it. The vast majority of people who do try this, who do get a second dog to help their first dog separation anxiety will tell you it made no difference whatsoever. They got a second dog, which is great, they love having two dogs, but for the most part it did not solve their first dog's separation anxiety.

And it's an incredibly risky undertaking too. What if your second dog develops separation anxiety? Well, the way things are at the moment, so many dogs seem to be developing separation anxiety. That could absolutely be something that could happen to you even if your second dog doesn't develop separation anxiety. What if they like to bark at noises outside? That's not going to be great for your dog with separation anxiety. What if the two don't get on?

What if your dog who doesn't have separation anxiety, your second dog, develops some other behavioral problem that you now have to work on, that you have to spend time, you have to spend money on that. The reason I say this is because one of those myths where a little nugget of truth gets exploded to become a universal truth, is that there are some situations where a dog does help another dog get over separation anxiety. And it's very dog dependent. For the vast majority of dogs, it makes no difference.

But occasionally someone will get a second dog with the intention of helping out their anxious dog, their first dog, and it works. So we hear that, we amplify it, we repeat it over and over and then before we know it, it's become another truth. Get a second dog. And you know, this "get a second

dog" myth kind of also fits with that "it makes sense" criteria. There is something about it which seems to be, yeah, that's logical. Of course the dog's lonely, so we'll get a second dog.

But the reality is that most of these dogs with separation anxiety need another, need a human to stop them from having anxiety when left. But most of them, a dog doesn't cut it. What about if you want to get a second dog, but if you really want to try it? Well, I'm not going to say don't get a second dog, I've got three dogs. How can I say that? But what I will say is think it through, work out if you can truly afford it. It's an expensive undertaking.

Work out if it would be okay if your other dog developed behavioral problems that you had to deal with. And are you going to be okay with all of that? If getting a second dog, that second dog makes no difference to your current dog's anxiety, also the best way to go about it if you are fixed on doing this is just foster. What if you discover that your dog does well with other dogs when left, that would be great. But you want to make sure that it's not just that dog that helps your dog.

You want to make sure that the dog you're adopting or the dog you're taking into your home is the one that's helping your dog. So foster to adopt, if this is what you want to do, that's going to give you your absolute best data on whether your dog is going to be one of the few that gets over separation anxiety because they've got a new doggy pal in the home.

Okay, one of the reason why myths take hold is they help explain to us something that's seemingly unexplainable because human brains are just not designed for ambiguity. We cannot cope with a void of information. We have to have answers. We also have a bias which says there must be an answer, there must be a reason why, and we need to find that why.

So when we can't find an answer in data and in facts, what fills the void? Myths. And those myths, especially when they seem to really explain something complex that the facts aren't helping us with, well, all of a sudden that myth is definitely a truth. So for example, in separation anxiety, you causing your dog separation anxiety is a myth that explains something.

Why did your dog get separation anxiety? That we don't actually have a concrete answer for in data. We don't have studies which say this is why your dog got separation anxiety. Unfortunately, we don't really know. And our human brains don't like that answer. They don't like it when somebody tells us, oh, we don't really know why. I can't tell you exactly why your dog got separation anxiety.

I can tell you what the contributing factors are, and there are many of them, but I can't tell you for certain why your dog got separation anxiety. And hence it's much easier to fill that void with a very strong statement that it's your fault.

In truth, why do dogs get separation anxiety? Well, as I said, we don't really know. But there are some factors that we know contribute, including genetics, what happened to your puppy when it

was born, those very, very formative early weeks, what happened to your puppy before it came home, what happened to your puppy even when it was being carried by its mom.

And so all of those things aren't related to you. Now, there are some things that we, especially as brand new owners, can do with a puppy when it first comes into the home to help stave off separation anxiety. For example, if we do puppy home alone training, which I set out in my puppy separation anxiety book, there's a chance that we can help a dog be comfortable with what's a really alien situation, being alone.

The problem is though, we can do all those things, and a dog might still develop separation anxiety because all those early factors in its life before it even came to us, have set it on a course of separation anxiety. So none of that is down to you. Now, if I said to you the reason dogs get separation anxiety is because we don't leave them as puppies, you need to leave your dog as a puppy and then you go off and completely ignore me, then maybe, just maybe, you might have some culpability here.

But really, that's not happening. That's not why your dog got separation anxiety. It is not your fault. Even if you were with your dog the whole time, your pandemic puppy, nobody was telling you that if you didn't step out of the door a couple of times a day, there's a chance that your puppy would get separation anxiety. We were under stay at home orders, we were locked down.

So guilt has to be I knew what I was doing and I ignored the right thing to do, so I did the opposite of what I should have done. So you must never feel guilty for your dog's separation anxiety and you must never think it's your fault. That is just a myth that has been constructed to fill that void, because we hate the answer of we don't precisely know why your puppy got separation anxiety.

However, we do know what we could do to get your puppy over separation anxiety or your dog. Another factor is when a myth is espoused by authority. And here it's about who makes a statement, but also who we decide is authority. Who or what we decide is authority. I mentioned earlier that right now a viral post is seen as something that is authoritative. If something goes viral on social, then we often place a lot of weight on that post because, heck, if all those people have liked it, then surely it must have some truth to it.

So authority doesn't have to be a scientist or a vet or a dog trainer or your family. It can be something completely impersonal like a viral post. If we decide, if we make the decision that that to us is authoritative, and that is what's happening with a lot of myths that go viral. You see them, they've got so many likes, it must be true. And going back to previous things we talked about, it gets repeated because it goes viral. Lots of these myths are making sense, the ones we see in the viral tweets and the viral postings, but it doesn't make them true.

A million likes doesn't make a myth into a fact. It just makes it a popular myth. So let's be really careful here, particularly when we see stuff online that popular doesn't mean factual. Another way

we fall into the authority trap is we assume that big companies must be authorities or companies with big marketing spend. So companies that are on Amazon selling CBD products, they have a lot of money to invest in that product. But just because they look polished and they look pro and they've got gazillion dollar marketing budgets, it doesn't mean that they are an authority on separation anxiety.

It just means that they can persuade us to believe what they want us to believe. So always check the facts. Always check the data. When you see ads for things, there's no harm in diving in to Google and asking the right questions. And I'm going to come on to shortly in this podcast, how you can find out how you can test your sources. And, you know, on that marketing spend piece, think about some of the really big name shock collar manufacturers or the indestructible crate manufacturers.

They tell us that the shock collar will fix separation anxiety. The crate manufacturers tell us that an indestructible crate will calm our dog. And they're so prominent and they seem so professional that surely they must be telling the truth because they seem so authoritative and credible. No, they've just got a really vested interest in selling a product that, by the way, they have no requirement to prove is effective. They can just say it. But meanwhile, lesser known experts can produce papers based on concrete data, based on studies on actual dogs that are packed with credibility, but just do not get the airtime.

Okay, so what can we do? How can we avoid being taken in by all these myths? As someone who was most definitely hoodwinked by a ton of myths when it came to separation anxiety, I want to share this with you in the hope that you don't make the mistakes that I made when I first started out. Number one, check your sources. And that could mean asking somebody directly. So if you're not sure, ask your trainer how they know what they know. Also, check your trainer's qualifications. And just because they call themselves a behaviorist, it doesn't mean to say that they spent six years studying how dogs learn and how we apply behavior modification techniques to dogs.

Anybody can call themselves that. They can do a half day course. So checking your source can mean checking where the source of the information comes from, but also checking the credibility of the person. Now, people often ask me, where did I get my information from? Where do I get my information from? Well, for a start, I trained at the Harvard for dog trainers, Jean Donaldson's Academy for dog training. And honestly, I could not have had a better education. And it was actually the best education I have ever had, not just in dog training, but I decided when I started out as a dog trainer that I wanted to have the best education that I could have so that I could be the best trainer that I could be.

And one of the things I learned as part of that program was how to dive into science so that I could challenge topics, I could challenge myths, I could challenge assumptions. And that's a really important skill that I've learned and I'm really pleased that I have. So we need to ask people where they get their information.

How do you know that it's just as important that they are also able to say we don't really know? And you will hear me say that if I know something because we've got research about it. I'm going to tell you if I'm sharing an opinion because it's an opinion. I'm also going to tell you that. And when I don't know, you'll often hear me say, because dog. What do I mean by that? Honestly, we just don't know why dogs do some of the things that they do. We don't know why they develop some of the problems they develop just because dog. And that's as good as we're ever going to get in terms of an explanation.

So saying I don't know is a really good indication. Sounds like I'm blowing my own trumpet here. I'm not. I learned to do this. I learned that sometimes saying I don't know is often not just sometimes. Often it's the best thing to say, let's not make stuff up. Let's say we don't know. Say we don't know because there isn't the data to support that. There isn't research. It's not that there's contradicting data, it's just that the data isn't always there. So ask people, how do you know that? Where did you get that from? Okay, the second thing you can do to avoid being taken in by separation anxiety myths is don't mistake opinion for fact.

So going back to that post that I was telling you about in my Facebook group, there's so much conflicting information no, there's so much confliction in terms of opinions. It's not information, it's conflicting opinions. Opinions and information and facts are different things and conflicting opinions, there's nothing wrong with conflicting opinions existing. That's how knowledge is developed and knowledge grows because we have conflicting opinions and we want to test them out. But don't mistake people shouting loudly their opinion on something with people who are basing that opinion in fact. And that's where the conflict comes with separation anxiety because it's people with an opinion that isn't based on anything giving you advice.

The reality is that the vast majority of separation anxiety trainers, people who truly focus on separation anxiety, actually give pretty consistent advice. There might be differences around the edges, but there isn't that much difference. So no, there isn't a ton of conflicting information. There's a ton of conflicting opinions, many of which are not based on anything other than just that person's point of view. The third thing you can do is stay skeptical.

Now, skepticism is often seen as a negative trait. Oh, you're so skeptical, you're so negative. But it's a healthy trait. It's a healthy way of thinking. It just means I'm going to keep an open mind and be ready to be persuaded by the science, by the data. By the facts. It's not. I'm automatically going to take up a position here. It means prove it to me, and I will then agree. I'll buy into it. Don't prove it to me, and I'm going to stay skeptical. Prove it to me, and you're probably going to convince me to change my mind. That's what a good skeptic does. A good skeptic isn't looking for data that supports their disbelief. They're actually truly open to data which changes their mind.

And that's very different from somebody who has a fixed view of the world. And no matter what you say to them, no matter what facts you throw at them, they ain't budging. So keep an open

mind. Be ready to be persuaded by science. And by facts, and be okay with changing your mind and putting your hand up and saying, I used to think this, but now I know this, actually. That's a really good place to be, and that's a great place to be for your dog, because stuff doesn't stay the same. Advice does change as we discover more, and so it should be. Let's not get stuck. Let's keep learning and keep applying new knowledge as it becomes available to us.

So I don't think this is the last podcast I'm ever going to make about myths. It's not the last time I'm ever going to talk about alternative facts in separation anxiety, but I hope this podcast has at least given you some sort of a framework to be a bit more challenging when it comes to some of the statements that people make about separation anxiety that actually are in no way factual, which aren't helpful and aren't good for either you or your dog. So good luck with that training, and I'll see you online soon.

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of the Be Right Back Separation Anxiety podcast. If you want to find out more about how I can help you further, head over to [Julienasmith.com](https://julienasmith.com). Meanwhile, if you enjoyed listening today, I would love it if you would head over to wherever you listen to your podcast and consider rating my show. Thanks so much. Good luck with that training, and bye for now.