

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 059 Transcript – Is It Really a Problem If Your Dog Really Follows You to the Door

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-59/>

Perhaps one of the most common questions that comes up in my Separation Anxiety Heroes group, which is my membership for all about separation anxiety training is, is it okay if my dog follows me to the door? Now, one of the things that we do in Separation Anxiety Heroes is we give members the option to have video reviewed, and we do see a lot of dogs walking to the door following their owner. So no wonder so many people ask, is that okay? And if you're in the midst of separation anxiety training, maybe you're asking the same, too.

Does it matter that my dog is on my heels as I go to the door, or does my dog actually need to stay in the same spot, maybe on his or her bed? Well, the spoiler is following is fine. What matters is how we observe the behavior in context and what else we see alongside the following. And that's why, in this episode, we're going to talk all about dogs who follow to the door.

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. All right, before we start to talk about following, let's do a really quick refresh of how we approach separation anxiety training. Now, if you're already doubling down on your separation anxiety training efforts, this will just be a quick reminder for you. But for those of you who haven't started yet, here's what we do. We are going to gradually expose our dogs to alone time.

Alone time scares our separation anxiety dogs, and so we need to teach them a brand new association that alone time isn't actually scary, it's actually fine, and that they can handle it. The training method that we use is very similar to the training method that we would use for dogs with Phobias, for people with Phobias, for dogs with Phobias too. But it comes from the way that we approach getting people over their fears.

So we take the thing that the subject is scared of. So with people that might be heights, with our separation anxiety dogs, that's being alone, and then we expose them to that scary thing. But here's the really important piece. We expose them to the thing that scared them at an intensity that isn't scary. So if somebody is scared of heights, we don't start by taking them to the top of the

Empire State Building or even the Eiffel Tower. And with dogs who are afraid of being alone, we don't start by leaving them for an hour or more. We take that thing, we take the scary stimulus, we dial it right down to a level that the dog or the person can cope with, and then we gradually increase it. And we only increase it when the patient or the dog can cope with the increase in the intensity.

There you go. That's separation anxiety training. In a nutshell, if you're working on separation anxiety training, you know, there's a lot more to it. But that's essentially how we get dogs to be comfortable on their own. The most important takeaway from what I just described is that you need to remember we are not teaching dogs to do something. And we spend a lot of time and we put a lot of effort into teaching dogs behaviors. We teach them how to sit when visitors come. We teach them to go to their map when we're eating dinner.

We teach them how to walk nicely on leash. So we spend a lot of time teaching behaviors. We might even be doing fun stuff. We teach them tricks, teaching them fun things to do. So lots of time and lots of effort is put into teaching dogs behaviors. It can be hard then, to think about a form of dog training where we actually don't care what the dog is doing, we don't care what he does at all in separation anxiety training. Why? Because we don't need him to do something new. We want him to feel something new, feel something different.

We want him to feel less scared of alone time. So we want to change how a dog feels about being alone. We want to change his association of being at home without anybody there. The behavior doesn't matter. As long as the dog starts to develop a new association, then we are good. But you'll have noticed if you're doing separation anxiety training, that lots of dogs start to follow owners to the door. It just happens. And if this is your dog, well, why is that happening? Why is your dog following you to the door? There are three big reasons why dogs do follow to the door.

And by the way, and this is really important if you were doing this training, if you were implementing this method, the method that I explained in my *Be Right Back* book, with a dog who didn't have separation anxiety. So a dog who didn't jump up and down when you were about to leave, but equally isn't scared, chances are they'll follow you to the door. Now, I've seen this so many times. I've watched videos of client dogs who happen to be in households with other dogs.

And so often, owners will start the training. They'll start going out of the door repeatedly, and dogs, the non anxious ones, will start to go, well, what's going on there? So the number one reason why dogs follow us to the door is curiosity. They want to know what on earth we're doing. Just going back to those videos of all the dogs that I've seen being trained for home alone time and owners repeatedly going in and out the door.

I've also not only have I seen other dogs in the household, the non anxious dogs take part. I've seen cats. It's quite hilarious when you see the cat taking part in the training too. So curiosity is a big driver of this behavior. You're doing something weird, you're doing something very novel, and

you're doing something which involves the door. And doors are exciting to dogs, so no wonder then they get curious about what the heck you're doing. And in fact, sometimes, often I love it when an owner will say, he just looked at me like I was losing it. That's kind of what we want.

We want them to go, what is she doing? Not, oh, my goodness, I'm so scared by what she's doing. We want them to go, what? In that quizzical way, because it's kind of normal that dogs would think this is a weird thing, because it is, and as long as they're not scared, then we're okay. So the second big reason why they're going to follow us to the door is that they expect something fun would happen. So I alluded to it in point one, doors are fascinating to dogs because often doors, especially front doors, lead to lots of great things.

The way that the dog gets to explore the world is he gets out of the front door. And the front door can lead to trips to the park and it can lead to sniffs, it can lead to ball games. But not only that, fun happens when people come in the door. So when mum or dad come home or when visitors come through the door, dogs who love people love it when the door opens.

In my household, one of the things that my dogs love about the front door is occasionally it will mean there's a parcel for them. Well, not for them dressed to me, but inside that box, there may be something amazing for them. Does that happen in your household, too? The funny thing is, it's very, very rarely for them, but they are so excited with anticipation that it might be for them that anytime we bring a box or a packet inside the door, I get surrounded by dogs going, OOH, what's that? So expectation of something fun is a big driver of why they might follow you to the door.

And then the third big reason and why they're prompted to shadow us as we go in and out is they learn through this training exactly what we want them to learn, which is that you come back. We're teaching dogs that not only are they okay on their own, but guess what? You come back, you go and you come back. You go and you come back. You repeat that over and over because you are trying to say to your dog, hey, it's fine when I go, I always come back. So they've got this expectation that you're going to come back, you're going to come back through the door soon anyway, so they may as well follow you to the door so that when you come back, they're there.

So no wonder then, dogs get into this habit of following us to the door, and as we go through this process of coming and going, it's also kind of impractical for dogs to go right back and hang out in our living rooms. Because if we're going out of the door, particularly when we first start training and duration is short, they don't even have the time to get back and go somewhere else. So just logistically, it doesn't work for them. So can you see now how we can't just say when a dog follows to the door, it's a really bad sign in that the separation anxiety training, that exercise you're doing isn't working. There is more going on. Let's also talk about another linked behavior, and that's waiting. So waiting and following, following and waiting tend to go hand in hand. Not all dogs that follow will wait at the door, but lots of dogs do.

Lots of dogs who followed you to the door will then hang out at the door. And also that's also okay, that's fine. Again, it doesn't necessarily ring alarm bells just because the dog follows, we're not immediately concerned just because the dog waits. It's not a reason to say that exercise went badly similar to the reasons why they follow. There are prompts and there are drivers for why dogs wait at the door. It's a bit like waiting for a bus. They have learned that you come back any minute now, just as dogs, dogs, just as we wait at bus stops, maybe the dogs wait with us. We learned that when we're at a bus stop, the bus is going to come soon, because that's the pattern we expect.

So from an efficiency point of view, a dog who doesn't have time to go back to the living room because we're doing these short departures and would like to greet you as you come in, just says, hey, you know what? I'm just going to wait by the door now, as we stretch the durations, it's true that the dog has time to go somewhere else and settle in another spot. But it's that any minute now phenomenon that we've created, a bit like with a bus, where it should come every minute, but it's not, it's two minutes, it's five minutes. We keep waiting because our expectation is that it is about to come along any second. And as we stretch duration in home alone training, so the dog's expectation still remains that any minute now you're going to come through the door.

So don't immediately stress out about following or waiting, because they aren't in and of themselves reasons to be concerned. However, with some dogs, we learn that actually being by the door or following isn't a good thing. And here we're talking about something else going on. We're actually saying that we've worked out that when this dog does this thing and it follows to the door, he isn't happy, he isn't okay, but we're not saying he followed, so he mustn't be okay.

Can you see the difference? We've learned that for this dog, that behavior is preempting anxiety, or maybe even it's already manifesting anxiety, because following for that dog is the way that it shows it's upset. How do we know that? Well, we're not looking at the steps it takes as it approaches the door. We're not looking at the following behavior, per se, or the waiting behavior, per se. We're looking at what else is going on. This is where you need to become a body language detective, but not about the big stuff. I think a lot of people get confused or misunderstood what it is we're looking for with separation anxiety training. We aren't really when we get into training, we are not looking at the big stuff. We're not looking for dogs who explode with vocalizing and howling and crying or they destroy or they chew or they soil.

That's what dogs who are upset when they're home alone, many of them do. But when we're doing training, we're keeping our dogs under threshold, or that's our goal. So we're not looking for over threshold behaviors. What we're looking for in exercises are the way more subtle signs, the micro behaviors that tell us, actually, that dog, he isn't comfortable, he isn't over threshold, he hasn't exploded like he used to do when he was left on his on his own. But there's something not quite right. And so when we start to see those micro behaviors and we see that the dog does those when it follows or waits, that's when we can start to say, you know what? As soon as he follows and leaves his bed, then we're going to cancel that exercise. But it's for that dog, and it's based on what

else we see. What do I mean by microbehaviors? Well, as the name suggests, it's really subtle stuff, and often it's very dog specific.

But you want to be looking at your dog's eyes, what it does with its ears. So not just ear placement, but ear movement, and it can be tiny, what's going on with their faces and particularly around their muzzle, how they carry themselves, their tail. And by the way, dogs tend to tuck their tails when they're really scared, when they're over threshold, the end of their back lowers and the tail tucks under. But a tail drooping down, just hanging there isn't a sign of anxiety. That's a dog with a tail that's doing nothing. But back to the micro behaviors you need to be really on top of. What does your dog do as it starts to get unsettled? And those microbehaviors, if you can spot them in your dog, if he can give you those signals. That is priceless, because that's going to help you stop an exercise way before he gets too upset.

If you decide that following and waiting are accompanied by microbehaviors that say, this dog is scared, my dog isn't comfortable, then you can decide, actually, I am going to take his behavior into account in deciding how this session went. So if your dog is a waiter or a follower and you've decided that it's okay for him to do that behavior because it's not a sign of him being anxious, what can you do? You might want to stop that behavior. So what could you do? Well, there are four things you can do if you are really troubled by that behavior, and I don't think you always have to be. But let me give you some tips just in case you are. Number one, don't go back and forth. Just stay at the door. So your dog is only going to follow you if you go backwards and forwards into the living room or into the kitchen. But you can do this training staying at the door.

Now, that is definitely going to make your dog wait at the door because you're not going back in. So just be aware that if you do that and it's a perfectly appropriate training approach, and I often recommend it, actually, particularly for dogs who get really amped up by us going backwards and forwards to the door often because they're really excited that something fun's going to happen at the door for those dogs. I actually like it when we stay at the front door. All right, number one. Number two, then if you have a waiter and you know your dog's not anxious, but he's just hanging out at the door, put a dog bed by the door. Put his favorite bed by the door so he has somewhere to go. It can be a bed, it can be a mat, whatever. Just give him a space to go chill.

I've seen dogs ace five hour sessions while being in the bed by the door. It's their choice, they're fine, but it's where they want to be, so let's make it comfortable for them. Okay? And then number three, if you try one and two, but you're still not entirely comfortable with what's going on, you can, as I said, call it. You can say, actually, I'm not sure, maybe I am seeing some anxiety, maybe I'm not. But I'm going to try the training with my dog not following or waiting. So there you're putting in a behavior contingency, and you're going to say for your dog, as soon as the following starts, I am going to cancel. I'm going to stop that exercise. And the final thing, just to reiterate, really keep being vigilant about the micro behavior.

So the more you train, the more you're going to spot these. So it's not a one point in time assessment of your dog's micro reactions to a stressful situation. You're going to monitor this all the way through. Things to look out for if you do have a waiter would be things like sniffing, freezing when at the door. And if you've got a dog who follows, then pace is often an indicator. So if your dog runs to the door to follow you and keeps running to the door every single time you do a departure, that's more worrying than a dog who kind of trots to the door or ambles to the door behind you. And you want to be particularly concerned if your dog picks up pace as you do step after step after step. All right, so some tips for you, some insights, I hope, but the big takeaway that I want you to reflect on is just because your dog follows or waits, don't automatically assume that that exercise was a dud.

It may be that your dog is just doing that behavior because of a whole host of other reasons other than anxiety. I hope this helps. If you have one of those dogs, keep that vigilance going, keep watching their behavior, and the more you learn about your dog and his microbehaviors, the better the separation anxiety training will go. All right, that's it from me for this week. 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. 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.