

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 062 Transcript – Emergency! What to Do When You're Left with No Choice but to Leave Your Dog

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-62/>

So you're doing everything you can to suspend absences. You've committed to that because you know it's what's going to make your training go as quickly as possible. Plus, you hate the thought of your dog being alone and getting freaked out. But then something happens and stuff will happen. As much as I know you're committed to this, as much as I know you want to make sure that your dog is fine and that your training goes well, things are going to come up.

And so in this week's episode, I want to look at what you can do in an emergency. What can you do when your best laid plans to manage absences just fall apart?

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 what is an emergency situation when it comes to separation anxiety training? I always say that there isn't really an emergency in separation anxiety training. So I'm not talking about the training part of it. I'm talking about when life happens, when stuff just gets in the way of all of your best plans to try and make sure that you keep your dog under threshold.

Now, quick refresher. Why do we need to keep our dog under threshold? What are we trying to do when we have all these elaborate plans in place not to leave our dog? Well, when a dog goes over threshold when it's home alone and it's left for longer than it can cope with, it responds with panic in many cases, and at the very least, extreme fear and anxiety. And that emotion is the exact opposite of what we are teaching our dogs to feel. Because with separation anxiety training, what we're doing is teaching our dogs that being home alone is absolutely fine. They've got nothing to worry about, it's not scary, it's all okay.

And so when they have an absence, when they have time on their own where they're frightened or they go into a panic, that undoes or potentially undoes the work that we have been doing to convey the message that, you know what? When you're alone, absolutely, it's all absolutely fine. So I know that when you try to manage absences, you are absolutely doing your best to avoid those situations. I do want to be realistic, though, and recognize that sometimes it is going to happen, and that's what we're going to dive into today.

Everybody's definition of emergency is different, though, and I really want you to be sparing in your use of emergency absences. I'm going to give you some tips for what to do when things are unavoidable. But I do want you to be really cautious in whether you absolutely have to leave your dog. It's a bit like breaking a diet.

Once you've had that first cake or those chips when you said, I'm giving them up, then that first occasion, that can become two, that can become three, and so on. Do you remember? You know how that goes. You say you're not going to do that, and then as soon as you go from absolute compliance to, well, it won't matter too much, will it? If I just have one, it kind of opens the floodgates.

So I've observed this with managing absences as well. It is way easier, in a weird kind of way, to stick to the really strict principle of there's no way I'm going to leave my dog. Because sometimes when we start doing these emergency absences, another one can creep in, or that seems as urgent and important as the last time I had to leave him on his own. So, yeah, I'm going to do it again. And you know what? He did survive.

So just be really cautious with how you use these emergency absences, because the thing is, even if you left him in the past and he got upset and it was okay, it doesn't mean necessarily that he was okay inside. So we've got to just be so careful with keeping these times when he has a bad experience to an absolute minimum. But I know it's going to happen and I know you've got a life to lead, and so I want to give you my best tips for making sure that you and he get through it as smoothly as possible. So the first thing I want you to do is to prepare.

Well, I know that sounds kind of weird, maybe because how can you prepare for an emergency? Well, you just need to think that it might happen. There might come a situation where I have absolutely no choice but to leave my dog. And you don't want to be doing there's some things that you can do in advance that you just don't want to be doing at the last minute. And the number one thing is to go and speak to your vet about what you can do if you have to leave your dog to go over threshold. And this is a bit like if you've got a dog who's sensitive to fireworks or to thunderstorms.

For most dogs, it's almost impossible to keep them under threshold when fireworks are going on New Year's Eve or Halloween, or when there's a massive summer thunderstorm. Dogs who are frightened of those noises tend to just trip over into panic because it's very, very hard to dial down the intensity of that scary thing.

And if you have a dog that experiences that phobia, you'll know that going to your vet, talking to your vet about medication is the number one thing you can do for a dog who panics at external noises like that. The medication helps reduce the intensity of that storm or of the fireworks in a

way that we cannot do. And so that's the number one thing we can think about in preparing for an emergency absence.

If we have to leave our dogs for longer than they can cope with, the intensity is too much. There's nothing we can do. We're leaving them for an intensity and a duration of absence that they can't cope with. So how can we change that intensity? We can change the intensity of the stimulus, the scary thing, the absence, by using medication. But you don't want to be doing that 2 hours before your emergency and planning ahead for short-term medication because that's most likely what your vet's going to discuss with you. They'll talk about some short-acting medication that will just help reduce the intensity, take the edge off the scary situation for your dog.

But as I said, that's not something that you're going to be doing 2 hours before your absence. You're not going to be calling up your vet and saying, "Oh completely, I don't know, this thing came up today. There's nothing we can do. We're in a panic. Can I come in? Can we get some meds for our dog to help?" Even if you've got a brilliant vet who says, "Yes, of course, come in, that's fine, we can do that, we can get you a prescription." You don't want to be doing that because when you put a dog on situational meds, you need to test the medication out before the exposure. So this is true whether we're talking about an emergency home alone absence or whether we're talking about a thunderstorm or fireworks or whatever it might be.

The first time you use a situational med is when the dog isn't experiencing the scary thing because you want to see how they are on that medication and at that dose. The thing about situational meds is dogs seem to have a very different reaction to different meds. And one dog will do brilliantly on a certain medication, on a certain dose for its weight, and then another dog will go on that and either have no reaction or have not a great reaction. So you don't want to be testing this out the day of your emergency absence. So definitely plan ahead, speak to your vet, test out the medication before any situation so that you know and you can feel comfortable that this medication is going to help when you do need it.

And the second thing then I want you to do, and this kind of goes out without saying, but I do want to say it, do everything you can. Do absolutely everything you can to avoid having to leave your dog in an emergency. Ask anyone. Ask everyone. Ask them to ask anyone and everyone. Put adverts in local Facebook groups, in neighborhood groups, ask around at work, do what you can. Because it's going back to that point I made earlier of once you start doing this and it feels like you might get away with it because you come back and your dog's in one piece, it can be really tempting to say, "Well, you know what? That's an emergency as well, or this is an emergency" and it's kind of a bit of a slippery slope, I feel like I don't need to say.

Point number two though, you wouldn't be investing time in your dog's separation anxiety, listening to a podcast about separation anxiety if you weren't 100% committed to this. So more likely than not, when it comes to leaving your dog in an emergency, you really have asked around.

If you haven't, give it one extra go. But I do trust that you will do as much as you can to find somebody.

So, number three, assuming that you absolutely cannot find anyone, what I want you to do is make the emergency absence as different as possible to your safe training absences. So sometimes dogs can differentiate the learning between this one's okay and this one's not okay. Because what we're trying to do, obviously, when we're managing an emergency absence, when we're trying to mitigate it, what we're trying to do is to stop your training from going backwards. So if we can say to the dog, "This one's scary, but normal training is okay," then we might protect the training absences. It's not guaranteed. Your dog might have a horrible over threshold experience during an emergency absence.

I know I'm saying it, but it's important that we get that out there because it could happen. But there is a chance, and it's a kind of small chance, but it's a chance that's worth putting the work in for that if we say if we create the emergency absence, make that so different to the safe absence that the dog can distinguish and that the learning and the experience of safe absences is protective. So how do you make that different? Well, the first thing we're going to use a cue. We're going to use either a word or picking up an object that you would never, ever use during your regular safe training. And so it can be anything.

I'll give you an example, actually, because in husbandry, so where we get dogs to be okay with things like having their nails trimmed or having injections, we often do have to deal with a situation where we're training them to be okay with something while having to do something that they're not okay with. So if you have a dog that suddenly has to have injections for diabetes every day, most dogs don't love having injections. And most people don't train their dogs to love injections because it's kind of a one-year thing or maybe once every three years, but maybe all of a sudden your dog has to have a daily injection. So we can use husbandry training to get dogs to be perfectly fine. If not, love having things done to them, things that they wouldn't otherwise be okay with.

But if you come home from the vets and you've got to start injecting your dog, you can't also get the training up and running that day, but you can start the training that day, but you can't guarantee that you'll get your dog to very quickly love having an injection done. So in that situation, we do use this concept of creating differences.

For example, when I was getting my dogs to love having their teeth brushed, I also kept brushing their teeth, knowing that they didn't love it too much. So we'd work on toothbrush training, and at the same time every night, I'd just come up to them and say, "Oh, I'm sorry, this one's not going to be fun. I'm sorry, this one's not going to be fun." And I would just repeat that and it kind of let them know that, oh, it was that licky horrible thing where she puts a toothbrush in my mouth and I hate the taste.

But another completely different time, I was working on a very incremental plan to get them to absolutely love having their toothbrushed, and that's where we are now. So find a phrase. It could be "I'm sorry" or "this isn't going to be fun" or "this is going to be horrid, I'm sorry." Just find any phrase you like and say that before you leave. For the emergency absence, you can layer in something like picking up a cue. It could be a really big object, kind of a weird object, I don't know. Pick up a chair and put it in a different location in the hallway, but you're just going to make sure that it's as different as possible.

And the second part of making it as different as possible, this emergency absence, is location. So if you normally give your dog access to the living room when you leave, maybe give your dog access just to the kitchen when you leave, or vice versa. So leave them in a different spot, leave them in a different location to where they would normally be. And then fingers crossed, because fear and emotion can be very context and very location specific in dogs. So fingers crossed they might go, "Oh, okay, I was left in the kitchen, and that's not normal, and that was different." Oh, back to training dogs, by the way.

Dogs don't know it's training. They just know safe, dangerous. That's the topic for a whole other episode. But if you can think about a different location, that might help. I don't mean a different house, obviously, although that can be an option too, by the way. So if you've got a friend who says, you know what, he can come over, but I have to go out for an hour, that could be an option too. Different location, different view of what's safe, dangerous, fingers crossed for your dog.

So we've got cues telling them that this isn't going to be good, telling them that it's not going to be great and it's going to be different. We've got location, and then we've got thinking about can you leave in a different way, can you leave out of a different door?

So if you live in a house, you've got a front door and a back door, leave out of a different door than you would normally use for training. And then the fourth thing, mix up what you do before you leave. So when you do this emergency absence, whatever you do when you do normal safe training, just don't do that. So if you set up your camera just before you do safe training, if you know you've got an emergency absence coming up, set up your camera way before.

Just think through, what do I normally do? What do I normally do when we train? And when you get an emergency absence coming up, do everything differently. That whole piece of trying to make your dog think this is different so that when you get back to training, they go, "Oh, okay, that was horrible and it was scary and all those things happen, but okay, this is the safe thing. Yeah, I'm fine with this. Okay." So that's what we're hoping for when we leave our dogs for an emergency number four.

Now, I always talk about exercise being an important part of a dog's everyday enrichment and that it's an important part of what we do to care for our dogs, giving them the right amount of exercise. But I also tell you that exhausting your dog is not the way to get a dog over separation anxiety.

However, if you have an emergency coming up, do exhaust your dog. It's the one occasion where I would say to you, you know what, it can't harm and it might well help. Maybe, maybe just having a dog that is slightly more tired than normal plus the medication, fingers crossed, that could make a difference. So if your dog normally gets half an hour sniffy walk, think about a good hour off leash, really up the ante on the exercise. It's not going to make the difference on an ongoing basis. Exhausting your dog doesn't fix separation anxiety. But we're talking about an emergency here.

We're talking about a situation that you need to just throw everything at it in the hope that it's going to make enough difference. It might not because lots of dogs, for lots of dogs, it doesn't matter how tired they are. It's like us if the house is on fire, it doesn't matter if we've run a marathon the day before, we're going to get out of bed in a panic at 02:00 A.M., if we hear the smoke alarms going off. But it might help. So well, it might help a dog in an emergency situation.

I'm sure running a marathon isn't going to stop you getting out of bed at 02:00 A.M., if the smoke alarm is going off. But yeah, exhausting your dog ahead of an emergency situation is a definite might help. And it can be physical exercise plus tons of mental exercise on top. But don't shortchange your dog on their physical exercise. Just kind of getting them really nicely tired might help here.

And then the fifth thing, I just mentioned it, we're going to get medication on board. You've tested it beforehand. You know which medication at which dosage helps for emergency situations for your dog. Get the timing right. I mean, obviously, if it's one of those complete emergencies where the phone rings and all of a sudden you're running to the hospital, you're probably going to forget most of these things and that's okay. You definitely haven't got time in that situation to exhaust your dog, and you haven't got time in that situation to get the medication on board in advance, which is what you're supposed to do. But I would say still give your dog medication.

So even if you've got like two minutes and you're running out of the door, I would still say, yeah, you know what, it should be an hour. It should be 2 hours for the medication. But to give in advance, but give it anyway. Give it anyway because in one of those situations where it is literally run out of the door, now, it won't harm you giving your dog medication as you run out of the door, even if it should have been a two-hour in advance kind of thing and it might help.

Number six, and this is really important, this is for you and your sanity. Don't look if you've just got a call and you've had to go to the hospital or if you've just been told that the dog walker can't come in an hour because they're sick, but you've got a massive meeting at work or a job interview. Don't be tempted to keep looking at your dog on camera. Don't peek, don't have a look. And that sounds really cruel and heartless, doesn't it?

What I'm saying to you is if there's nothing you can do about your dog when he's home alone in that emergency and you're stressing out and it's making the situation you're dealing with even

worse, then it doesn't do you or him any good to look. Now, obviously, if what you're saying is, well, I'm going to keep an eye and if it gets really, really bad, then I'm going to implement plan B, then I would say to you, well, maybe you should have implemented plan B before you even went out. So I think in this situation where you've exhausted every single avenue for getting somebody to be with your dog and you know there is no choice for that one hour during the course of training where you've been so diligent, there is going to be this one hour.

Don't look at the camera. You can look afterwards. I'm not saying that. And actually, it would be really heartbreaking, but helpful to look afterwards. But in that moment when you're out and especially when you can't do anything, don't look. Yeah, we look during training because we can get back any minute. That's why we look.

We look because we want to make sure that we're out for the right duration, that nothing is happening before the target duration, and that we rush back if there's a problem. But if you're completely unable to get back, looking is only going to make everything worse for you. Have a look when you get back and accept that it's okay not to peek, because you're not going to do anything as a result of what you see.

So those are my six top tips for dealing with emergencies. Obviously, I hope this never happens, because I don't want you to have to deal with that in your life, let alone the added stress of worrying about what to do with your dog. And let's try and limit it to true emergencies. Be as creative, imaginative, and resourceful as you can. Plan for the emergency, which I know is kind of weird, but accept that, yeah, one day it might happen, and if so, you know what to do.

That's it from me for this week. Thank you so much for listening. I really appreciate you tuning in, and I look forward to catching you soon. Bye for now.

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Thanks so much. Good luck with that training, and bye for now.