

## Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

### Episode 070 Transcript – Relax! What We Really Mean by Relaxation in Separation Anxiety Training and Why That Matters

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-70/>

If you're like most people who are working on their dog's separation anxiety or hopeful about getting a dog who can be left. You've probably read or heard or been told that when you go out, whether that's for a two second training absence or whether it's for a two hour absence while you go and do something, your dog needs to be relaxed. You've probably been told that what you need to teach your dog is that your dog needs to relax when you're not there. And so you might be placing an awful lot of emphasis whether that is during your training absences or whether it's during your actual absences, you might be placing an awful lot of emphasis on, is my dog relaxed? Is that relaxed? Is my dog relaxed enough?

But I want to tell you that that focus on the whole concept of relax and relaxation can actually be misplaced. We focus too much on this idea of relaxation or on a notion of relaxation that isn't actually either realistic or helpful. And so that's why in this episode, I want to unpack by what we're really looking for when we're doing our absences and why it can be so misleading and unhelpful if we just focus on our definition of what relaxation looks like.

Let's dive in.

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 it seems to be commonly accepted wisdom that what you're trying to do is you're trying to go out for x amount of time while your dog exhibits relaxation. Your dog relaxes, and your dog must relax. You are often told, I'm sure, in order for the training to be successful, but I'm going to tell you today.

Why that's not the case. I want to start, though, with a really quick review of what the training involves. So what are you actually doing when you do these absences? When you go out of the door and you come back, when you build up that duration? What's going on?

We are showing your dog when you do this training, we're showing your dog that being alone isn't scary. It's actually okay. So currently your dog is frightened of you going, it's frightened of being

left on its own. And so it has a scared it has an anxious response to the thing. The thing here is you leaving. And the way that we change how a dog feels about something that it's scared about is we take the thing, the thing that it's scared of, the fearful stimulus, the fear inducing stimulus, if you want to get techy about it. And we present the thing that the dog's scared of, but at an amount or an intensity or a duration that's not scary to the dog, that doesn't induce anxiety.

So with home alone training, that's time alone with thunder, that's the volume of the thunder. With strangers, that's usually a stranger being further away. So we can play around with intensity to make the scary thing presented, but not in a scary way, so that the dog goes, oh, wait a minute. Yeah, that's that thing that I am kind of scared of, but right now I don't feel scared of it.

Why? Because we've turned the intensity down for the dog and we present the thing. Scary alone time for a dog who doesn't like being left over and over, but we present the scary thing at that lower intensity and we increase the intensity as long as the dog is okay with each step.

And that's how we change how a dog feels about anything it's scared of. We want the dog to go from OOH, OOH, don't like that stimulus, that thing that scares me to with home alone training, oh, neutral, don't care. Not bothered yet, fine, notice it. But yeah, it's not threatening to me with some fear based training where we change other fears. I mentioned stranger fear, I mentioned thunder. Other things that dogs are quite commonly scared of would be vet visits, having their nails trimmed, that kind of stuff. With those types of training, fear based training, behavior modifications, we'll often use food to change how the dog feels from scared of to really quite like that thing.

Why? Because when we introduce food, the food starts to the scary thing or the scary thing dialed right down to an intensity that isn't scary, starts to predict food. However, we know, and I'm sure you've already dived well into this food isn't great for separation anxiety training for lots of reasons. And I've got other podcast episodes on this that you can dig into and have a listen to.

Why isn't food the right thing for training with separation anxiety, but because we're not using food, we're not going to get dogs to absolutely love being left. I mean, there isn't a dog in the world. Even dogs who are abused, sadly, still love it more often than not when their people are around. They're still typically happier when their people are around than when they're not. And the vast majority of dogs certainly are way happier when their people are around than when they're alone. It's just that with our dogs, with our separation anxiety dogs, it's not just that they're disappointed or unhappy that we've gone.

They're fearful, they're scared.

So we're not trying to get these home alone dogs to go from scared to woohoo. I can't wait. I'm so glad you've gone out. Being alone is the best thing ever. It's not like us on a Thursday night. You remember back in Lockdown when we were home with our other half, our family that rested a

whole time. And then finally we started to get some freedom. And then maybe one night, that Thursday night, our other half says, hey, guess what? I'm going out tonight. And we've been cooped up with them for six months. Sorry, husband Jason, but you know what I'm talking about here. That Thursday night, we're like, oh, my goodness, this is going to be brilliant. I'm going to have a bath, I'm going to watch what I want to on TV, I'm going to eat what I want. And we actually really enjoy that time on our own. But no dog is doing that, right? No dog is jumping up and down saying, yay, I can't wait. This is brilliant. So the best we can hope for is that our dog goes from scared of being left to, okay, this is. Disappointing, but yeah, I'm fine with it anyway.

So that's the process. And that's where we want dogs to go from scared and to neutral, not bothered. But in between, there's a lot of work and there's a lot of change that goes on. Now back to that relaxation concept. We ideally do eventually want your dog to be able to go, okay, fine, you're gone. I'm just going to find one of the beds that you've left for me, and I'm just going to chill out here until you come back.

But for now, we actually don't need that here's. Why? Because we just want your dog to feel better about being left. We don't need them to do something. And the problem with requiring a dog to go to a bed or go to a sofa is that's kind of our definition for many of us, that's how we see relaxation, that a dog is relaxed because they're on the bed. Oh, they must be relaxed. They're on the bed. And actually, they have to be relaxed when they're doing this training, so they must have to be on their bed.

But no, they just have to feel differently. Now, I don't know about you, but I can be standing up, maybe cooking in the kitchen, listening to music, and feel really, really relaxed, really non anxious, non stressed contented, okay, fine. I don't have to sit on the sofa or lie flat on my bed to be relaxed. Those aren't the only times that I can feel relaxed. And it's the same with dogs. What we really mean by relaxed is we are looking for an absence of fear. And unfortunately, we tend to operationalize it. We tend to put it into our little brains that relaxed means on a bed or relaxed means completely checked out in another room, not at all bothered about what we're doing in the very early stages of training.

For most dogs, that's not going to happen. And it's totally unrealistic to expect that to happen. It's not reasonable to expect them to stay on their bed when we start this training. And even for some time into the training because we are doing something or really strange and really odd that even if it doesn't scare our dogs, because remember, we try to keep them under threshold by turning that intensity down, the anxiety threshold, we keep them under that by turning the intensity down. But it's unreasonable to expect them not to be flat out because they're intrigued or wondering or confused or just kind of want to know what we're doing. An interest, curiosity, just kind of wonderment at what we're doing is fine, but usually those emotions or those responses, what the heck is going on? Result in a dog who isn't going to stay in their bed.

So we got to stop expecting that from the outset. Dogs are going to stay in their bed. I'm going to fast forward now and tell you that comes, that does come with training and in a second I'm going to show you the three stages of relaxation that you can expect as you go through the training process. Another big reason why it's unreasonable to expect dogs to stay in their bed when we start this training, apart from the fact that it's not necessary, what we're doing, is it's really salient.

Going out of a door for most dogs is a big deal. Whether that's an anxious dog or an unanxious dog, you going out of the front door is a really salient and a very significant event. So no wonder then that most dogs, not only do they, in the initial stages of training, not stay in their bed, but they come and hang by the door, because doors are exciting and they invoke all sorts of questions in dogs like, well, am I coming? Where have you gone? He coming back. And of course, we come back quickly too. So, hey, wait a minute. If I go and hang by the door, mum always comes back in a few seconds, so I'm just going to stay here.

Your dog following you and staying at the door does not mean that your dog is stressed or anxious. Your dog could follow you nicely to the door, sit by the door, wait for you by the door and still be relaxed. Relaxed, as I said earlier, is the absence of anxiety. It isn't a dog on a bed. In fact, a dog could lie on a bed and be quite anxious. So we're looking for absence of anxiety. What does that mean? You've got to get really good at checking your dog's body language if you're not doing this already, recording your sessions, watching them back, checking for tension in your dog's body.

If your dog follows you to the door, I don't want you to see a dog who's trotting and increasing in tempo when they follow you to the door. I don't want to see a dog that's kind of like a coiled spring by the door when they're waiting, like getting more and more and more amped up. We definitely don't want to see excessive, very important word, lip licking, excessive yawning, excessive tension through your dog's body. But following, waiting. Dogs can be relaxed when they do those things. So it's the body language that matters most.

So keep saying to yourself, my dog doesn't have to do anything when I do this training. I don't care about his or her behavior, I'm just focused on changing how he or she feels. Keep saying that to yourself because it's a critical principle of separation anxiety training.

I mentioned that was going to talk you through the three stages of relaxation that you will ultimately see when you train. So let's look at those. Now the first stage, if you're keeping your dog under threshold, so the intensity of the alone time not too high, your dog's fine with it. In the first stage, you might see following, you might see watching. But the first stage of relaxation is noticing that that following and that watching isn't accompanied by anxious behavior and the sorts of things that I mentioned earlier in the podcast.

So just to recap, excessive pacing, excessively quick following to the door, kind of trotting, and that pace increasing, lip licking, that's way over the top, grooming, yawning, stressful, tense, body language. So if you're not seeing those, even if you're seeing waiting or following, chances are

you're in stage one of the relaxation process that we get with a dog going through home alone training.

And with stage one, you might find that you can do a lot of training sessions and your dog never moves out, never progresses from stage one. Your dog is still relaxed, but just relaxed on its own terms, not in a bed, not still on the sofa, but not anxious. Okay, so you might then as hopefully your separation anxiety training progresses and does really well, you do really well, you might then move to stage two, but it could take you a long time.

I mean, I have seen dogs progress to hours or more, an hour or more, and still follow, but happily follow, still wait, but happily wait. So don't freak. If you keep training and training and your dog seems to be still at stage one of the relaxation process, stage two, this is when you might start to see the following happen. Less. Again, your dog isn't anxious. They are still acutely aware though, of the whole process. So they know what you're doing, they know you're doing that thing again, but they've decided that, you know what, it's just not quite as worth it to them to follow you now.

So they're still clocking and noticing that you're going, but they are not necessarily following every single time you go to the door. Or they might decide that every single time you go to the door, they're just not going to bother at all. Still not necessarily in a bed though, still not curled up going, oh, I don't care what you doing, that's fine, whatever. Again, you might spend quite a lot of time on stage two. Perfectly okay, perfectly okay. You might be doing really long absences and still have a dog who follows you frequently. That's okay.

Let's look at stage three, though. And stage three I think is the goal for most of this, I think.

Often because we believe that if our dog isn't on a bed or isn't cozy on a sofa, like quote, normal dogs, then somehow the dog's having a really bad time and it breaks our heart. We don't want to see our dog sat by the door. And I get that. But you've got to remember that if you get to stage three or even if you're on stage one and you've got a dog who follows but isn't anxious, that's huge progress from the dog who used to lose it when you even so much as thought about going out of the door.

So stage one, two and three, are we're talking about dogs who are doing just fine, but stage three seems to be the stage that everybody wants to get to, sometimes too quickly. Sometimes we want to rush to this stage, but stage three is basically where the dog goes, oh, just not worth following and waiting at all. I mean, I'm going to raise my head and just check what you're doing, but I'm staying in my bed. And yes, this is more like what lots of quote again, air quotes. Again, normal dogs do. Side note though, plenty of dogs who don't have anxiety follow to the door. And you'll notice this when you're working, if you've got two dogs in the household and one of them's got anxiety and the other hasn't.

But stage three is definitely the ideal for most of us. We want to be able to go out and leave our dogs and not just for us to go out for a period of time, but also think that our dogs are having as good a time as they possibly can have when we go out. But again, just remember that whichever of these stages you're in, your dog is doing okay and it's their choice. Give them the choice to be where they want to be, to do what they need to do when you're going through the leaving training.

So give them that choice. And if it takes them a long time to choose to stay on their bed and stay asleep, then so be it. As long as they're not anxious, they are making the choice and they are okay. Now, I've described these stages as distinct, but quite often it could be a mix. So you might see that sometimes your dog follows you on every step and then you might do an exercise the next day and your dog decides that they are going to stay on their bed.

So these stages can be mixed and like anything with separation anxiety training, it's never a straight line. So you might think, oh, my goodness, we're getting there. I can go to the door, and she stays in her bed, and then the next week, you don't see any of that.

The key takeaway, though, is in all of this, in all of this, thinking about relaxation is relaxation is the absence of anxiety. And as long as you have that, the training is going well and your dog is fine. Don't make it more difficult for yourself and more emotional and potentially disappointing for yourself by thinking, unless my dog is curled up in her bed, I'm not doing it right. As long as your dog isn't anxious when you do the training, that's when you know you're doing it right.

Thanks for listening today, and good luck with that training. 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](http://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.