

# Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

## Episode 077 Transcript – Can Calming Music Really Soothe Your Anxious Dog

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-77/>

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.

If you've ever searched on separation anxiety on social media or on Google wherever, then I'd be really surprised if as a result of you doing that, you haven't then seen an ad pop up somewhere for things related to separation anxiety, right? Because, well, the internet, that's kind of how it works. So there you are, you're in Instagram and you're seeing all these posts for the things that are going to get your dog over separation anxiety, right? Calming beds, or maybe it's an amazing essential oil, you name it. They all seem to pop up when we've had a look for separation anxiety, don't they?

And if that's the case, if you're seeing those ads, I think there's a really good chance you'll have seen an ad for calming music. Calming music for dogs. Calming music to help anxious dogs. Well, maybe if you haven't seen it pop up in your social feed, maybe you've seen those in search results, maybe you've seen it in the community groups that you're in. The point I'm trying to make is it's everywhere, this concept that if we play calming music specially selected for dogs, then they're going to be calm?

Yeah, right. It's calming music for dogs. You're going to be able to play this music, pop on the playlist, and all of a sudden from nowhere, your nervous pup transforms into a dog that you can suddenly confidently leave. And who aces their alone time. Woohoo. But is this really the case? Is it?

Or is this just yet another myth about separation anxiety and separation anxiety recovery? And if you do use music, maybe you're already using music and you might be worried because maybe you've heard that if you use music, if you put anything on a playlist or whatever it is you use, if you do that before you leave, you're actually not going to calm your dog. You're going to make things worse. Because putting that music on every time you leave is just tipping your dog off.

And well, not so fast, because that's also another separation anxiety myth. And that's why in this episode of the Be Right Back podcast, I dive into the topic of music. When to use it, how it can help, when it can help, and what it can really do for your home alone dog.

Let's start off by talking about the uses of music. You'll find music in vet clinics, in exam rooms. You'll often find groomers playing specific music. You definitely find some shelters that play music for dogs. And I'm going to talk about calming music in this podcast, but we're also going to talk about music more generally.

But let's define calming music. Typically, what we're talking about when we talk about calming music for dogs, it's a playlist or a download or a channel that has been curated specifically to help with anxious dogs. So whoever's curated it has decided this music is going to work at helping anxious dogs feel less stressful. When I talk about calming music in this podcast, that's what I'm talking about.

And it seems like a really strong overall impression out there that music helps. Lots of people think it does. It wouldn't be used in so many places if lots of people didn't think calming music helps. I've worked with plenty of owners who absolutely swear by it and who say, music music is everything. Music is the thing that soothes my anxious pup.

So is there any truth to this? Well, there is research. You know me, I like my research. And the research about calming music is actually really quite positive. A 2020 study was done and it was a systematic review of studies. So they took all the studies about the impact of music on dogs with stress and they reviewed them all. Most of those studies were done in a rescue environment or in vet clinics. And most of those studies did seem to conclude that music produced a calming effect.

Now, not all of those studies looked at specific dog focused playlists or downloads or channels. They also looked at different types of generally available music. So they were just looking at music broadly. But it's interesting, isn't it? So it seemed to suggest, certainly the authors of this systematic review seemed to believe that music was having a benefit.

Here are their big conclusions from that systematic review. Musical therapy, they talked about this concept as musical therapy. Musical therapy, they said, did seem to reduce stress in dogs. Then they said it was really important, and I actually say this all the time, it's really important to work out what any one dog found comforting in terms of music, and equally, if not more important, what they don't like in terms of music.

I'll give you an example of that. If you've ever played sleep music or maybe even some calm music playlist, you might have heard those ones that are sort of nature sounds. They're from the jungle or the rainforest. Well, if I play one of those to one of my dogs, he loses it because of the bird song. So he's like, Whoa, what is that sound of creatures BOP, BOP, BOP. Not calming for him at all.

So going back to the review of reviews, the author said, yeah, definitely work out what your dog likes and be really careful about what your dog doesn't like. They went on to say another key point that they concluded was they didn't find any benefits from the dog-specific music that you can get.

Okay. So that's important, I think, because many of us, when we are thinking about music for dogs, are thinking, we have to go and get specifically curated music, we have to pay for a playlist.

The research says, no, you don't. If calming music helps, if music helps, it's dog dependent and you don't have to buy it. The other point, and the final big point I think is important, that they concluded was, yes, they carried out most of their research in institutional settings. I mentioned vets, groomers, rescue centers, but the authors said they also saw benefits for dogs in a domestic setting. So it sounds fairly positive, doesn't it?

They didn't conclude that calming music or music of any type was going to stop a dog from being anxious. It's not like, play this music and your dog is going to be okay. And I say that all the time. With dogs, with separation anxiety, the way you get a dog over separation anxiety is you gradually expose them to increasing amounts of alone time and you gently ramp that up over time, right? So it's just alone time in tiny increments, all the other things that we often talk about.

And I'll put music into the category of other things that can help. They are just helping. They're contributing if they do anything at all, right? So they are neither necessary in lots of cases, nor are they sufficient. So don't get too excited. It's kind of good news, but it's not nearly everything. I put calming music or music that you might play for your dog when you leave. I put that into the category of what I call the can't harm might help category.

So using it is not going to have any detrimental effect on your dog, unless you've got a dog like mine who reacted to birds. But you see what I'm saying? If you pick the right music and you're not paying for it, chances are that worst case, it does nothing, but best case, it may help a little bit. So should you use music? And if so, how should you use it?

Well, maybe I should have said at the start of the podcast, I am a massive fan of people using music when they do separation anxiety training. But not just music. I really encourage people to think about background noise, particularly those people who have a dog. Maybe this is you who reacts to every noise in the hallway if you live in an apartment, or who barks at every car door slamming if you live in a busy street.

So when you've got a dog like that, who you're trying to get to be happy on their own, and you're doing this gradual exposure training, and then 1 minute and 32 seconds into the training, boom, big noise downstairs, conversation in the hallway. Lift pinging, dog reacts. If you've got one of those dogs, then doing everything you can to mask noise matters if you want to get really geeky about it.

The way that sound and light travel is very different. It might seem like a no-brainer because we're just so used to it, but light is much easier to block out than sound because sound travels through stuff. So you can put blinds up at a window and it will block the glare of the street lamp from

downstairs. But you really struggle to block the conversation that two people are having standing under that street lamp downstairs in the road, right?

So blocking sound is hard unless you find some fancy way to super, super insulate your apartment, which is not going to happen, right? It's not the reality for most of us. But what you can do with sound is you can mask it with other sounds. And that's the number one best way that you can try and achieve some harmony and some peace in your apartment or in your home if noises are coming in from outside and making your dog react. So you need to think about layering noise.

It's what I call it.

We want multiple different types of noises. Because the noise that comes into your apartment or your home isn't just a single noise. A car door is made up of different kind of notes and tones almost. And so are conversations. Conversations sound different to car doors slamming and a dog barking sounds different to the sound of a police siren. So all sorts of different noises that come into our homes have different frequencies. And yeah, they're just different. So the more that we can do similar things inside by layering on noise, the more chance we've got of blocking out noises that cause our dog to react.

So music is absolutely one of those things. But it doesn't have to be music. It could be the TV, it could be a fan, it could be an air conditioning unit, it could be you name it. So anything that makes a noise, some people spend money on things like a white noise machine. I always say, yeah, you could do that. You could go and spend \$50 on Amazon and get a specific white noise machine. But you've also got white noise playlists on things like YouTube or Spotify or other places where you might download or stream music.

Those are the biggies side note.

White noise can be quite hard on some dogs' ears. So there are white noise channels on YouTube if you're delving into those.

Also look at brown noise. It seems to be easier on everyone, similar kind of concept. It blocks outside noise, but it's a little bit less harsh.

Okay, so that's my number one reason for suggesting you use music as part of a layering strategy. And if you find that your dog is also calmed by that music, then bonus. The second reason I suggest that you use music is because of the research.

That I just talked about, right?

I said it can't harm to play music and it might well help. If you think there's some music that seems to have some calming effect on your dog, go for it. How can you tell? Well, try it out at other times,

put the music on when you're not doing separation anxiety training, but at times when you know your dog might get a little bit upset. It could be because they're reacting to noises outside, or it could be if you've got a dog who's really attached to you. Maybe playing calming music seems to make them follow you a bit less around the house. So test out the calming music, see if your vet uses music, test it out, find out what your dog likes. It may be that music makes no difference to your dog and that's okay. I would still suggest you think about using it because of reason number one, masking noise that comes in from outside.

For a reactive dog.

And then the third reason I suggest using music is, well, it's kind of all the things wrapped up together. It might have some benefit both for dogs just on a calming basis, but also for the ones who are losing it at noise outside. And if you do it right, it doesn't cost anything. So you can get free subscriptions to lots of different music players and it might not cost anything. Now, just one thing to throw in the mix there. I've talked a lot about music, but you could equally talk about TV. Some people swear by audiobooks or podcasts even. Again, it all goes back to finding out what works for your dog.

If you're thinking about layering and trying to mask noise from outside, my top tip for you there would be to pick a playlist that's continuous. I got obsessed with this over the years because we had to manage this situation. We had one dog who reacted to stuff outside and Percy who had separation anxiety. So India would react and Percy would start, and once Percy had started, especially very early on in training, it was game over. So we were doing all this masking and layering and it really, really did help. And so I got obsessed by is it brown noise versus white noise? And I got really obsessed by things like continuous playlists that don't have any gap between the music. So find continuous loop playlists. I'm pretty sure all the ones on YouTube are like that, but do check. And also beware of ads.

That's one of the reasons why I don't love TV necessarily because you might have ads, or maybe it's a radio station. And thing about radio stations is there's always talking in between the music. Sometimes the talking is at a lower volume than the music. You definitely when you're doing this masking thing, want to pump the volume right up. If you think music has a calming effect on your dog and that's why you're using it, because you've tested it out, you probably don't need to worry so much about really blasting out the music.

But wait a minute, I hear you say, what about the fact if I put music on before I go, or if I put the TV on every time I'm about to leave, that becomes a tip-off. Tip-offs we know are bad news because it becomes a pre-departure queue and that's just going to be a disaster.

Well, not so fast.

There's a lot of muddled thinking about pre-departure cues. Everybody gets really fixed on the concept that all pre-departure cues are bad and they are going to really affect training and we have to work on pre-departure cues. No, that's not true. The thing about a pre-departure cue is not the thing itself but what it predicts. Keys are the classic one, right? Lots of dogs react to keys being picked up. Dogs with separation anxiety and without separation anxiety, lots of dogs react when keys are picked up. Dogs didn't come into the world thinking that keys meant anything to them. Keys develop meaning. So for a dog who's got separation anxiety and who panics when you pick up keys, your dog wasn't born being scared of keys, nor did it just develop a fear of keys. It didn't wake up one morning and go, "Whoa, keys are such scary things. What's actually going on is that they were either born with a fear of being left or they developed a fear of being left. And keys are just information.

Keys, as pre-departure cues, are information that says, "Uh oh, mom's about to go, that's bad news, I'm going to freak out." Can you see? Keys aren't a problem. It's what they predict. And it's the same with music or fans or white noise machines or TVs. It isn't the item or the thing in and of itself, it's what it predicts. So if you've never used music before, if you've left your dog in the past, but you didn't put music on, or if you've never left your dog in the past, and that's irrelevant, you've never used music because you never left your dog. And now you're doing separation anxiety training and you are putting on music before you leave, what does the music predict? It predicts that you're doing separation anxiety training and that should be safe. You should be leaving for times that are no longer than your dog can cope with.

So music shouldn't predict a bad thing, it actually predicts a neutral thing. And we know from different research that predictability is actually really helpful for a brain. Brains, particularly anxious brains, like to know what's coming. So predicting that this one's going to be okay because, you know what? When I put this music on, I go out, but I don't go out for longer than you can cope with. Music is now saying, "It's okay, music goes on. It's okay, you can cope. Okay." So this is different because when you used to leave me before, it was really scary, but you put music on. And okay, oh, you put the TV on. Okay, I see. It's going to be okay, right? So don't get too muddled about pre-departure cues. They aren't bad. What's bad? What can be bad is what they predict. But if they predict something neutral, then they aren't a problem. Okay, so let me just summarize with my five tips for when you use music.

First of all, as I mentioned, find out what seems to work best for your dog and rule out what doesn't. Find the music that works for them. Your dog's not going to tell you which track he loves. He's not going to give it a heart on a playlist, but you can at least tell which ones he really, really dislikes. If he reacts to the noise in the music, you know it's not the right one.

Number two, when you're going for playlists, try ad-free ones. And depending on where you are in the world, there's a ton of music apps, a ton of radio apps, so I won't go into all of that. You know which ones are out there, but try to go for ad-free.

Number three, avoid music with breaks so radio isn't so good. Playlists that have gaps in them. Look for anything that's got continuous elevated volume.

Number four, if you've got a dog who doesn't like outside noises, don't just use music to mask noises when you go out on a training session, when you're doing gradual exposure, use it all the time because when a dog starts to react to outside noises, it becomes more and more on edge. It becomes sensitized. So the more it barks at outside noises, the more your dog will continue to bark at outside noises. It's really nice to see when you start masking the noise, some dogs can actually almost visibly breathe a sigh of relief because they're no longer being bombarded with noises that are triggering them. So if you're using music for masking, it's not just for separation anxiety training time, it's for other times too.

Number five, don't worry about music being a tip-off or being a pre-departure cue. As long as you've only ever used music or put the TV on when you're doing safe departures, it's all good.

So will music cure your dog's separation anxiety? No, it won't. But it definitely won't harm and it may help even if just a little. Thanks so much for listening. I'll catch you on the next one. Bye for now.

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://www.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.