

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 079 Transcript – Percy and the Mystery of the Great Regression

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-79/>

Regressions. Oh, my goodness. Everybody who has a dog with separation anxiety just dreads the idea that their dog might regress. But what happens when you're a dog trainer who specializes in separation anxiety and you've written books on the topic? What the heck do you do when your dog, who was previously fine, suddenly has a massive wobble? Well, that happens to my dog Percy, back in the summer of 2022.

And the good news? Well, the good news is he is absolutely fine. Again, the bad news? Well, there isn't really any bad news in this episode. I'm going to dive into exactly what was going on, how I became a detective to work out what was going on, why, when your dog wobbles, it might not be the bad news that you think it might be. And I'm going to share my tips for what you can do, if, or more likely, when, your dog has one of these regressions.

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 just a little while ago, my husband and I discovered that out of the blue, Percy could no longer be left alone. Now, this is Percy, the dog who, many, many years ago, couldn't be left, but after lots of hard work from us, got to a position where he was fine, where we could leave him, where we could come and go as we please. You know that freedom that you get when you've got a dog who doesn't worry about being alone on his own? Well, that disappeared and he's no longer that dog.

So this episode is all about how the heck that came about, how I felt. But there is some good news because it turned out to be a temporary thing. So do listen to see how we got him back to being a dog who was okay on his own. All right, let's start with what happened.

A few months back, he essentially had a massive, massive regression. Now, I hear the word regression used all the time and I'm always saying to members of my separation anxiety heroes club, is that really a regression? So when people say he was fine, he was doing two minutes and now he can only do 20 seconds, it's just a massive, massive regression. I will say to them, no, that's not a regression. That's just natural and normal variability. I've done lots of other podcast episodes where I've talked about normal variability, so you should definitely check some of those out. When dogs are first learning to be home alone, in fact, when they're first learning anything new,

particularly when it comes to a change in emotion. So a new association, the learning is never a straight line. And especially very early on where the new association is fresh and it's new and it's not really hardwired into the dog's brain yet. What can happen is they revert to the old association. So we see this ping-pong around and people get very panicky about it. But luckily I've seen it so many times that it's really easy for me to say truthfully, no, that's fine. It really has just the natural, normal up and down of early training. And in fact, not just early training, but as we continue training, we're going to see dogs going from longer times to shorter times and it doesn't mean anything other than learning is not a straight line.

However, when you have a dog who has been fine on his own for the longest time, we're talking about a really big portion of Percy's life. Now, he's been a dog who's been fine to be on his own, who then out of the blue, can't handle being alone. And this would be it doesn't have to just relate to alone time. This could be a dog who was formerly frightened of strangers or didn't like thunderstorms, but got to be okay with them. So when the fear returns, when the behavior that relates to the fear comes back out of nowhere after a very long period of time, then I think we're justified in calling it a regression. So those early blips or those training blips where you go from longer times to shorter times, shorter times to longer times, they're not regressions. But my big worry was that a few months ago something was happening to Percy that looked very much, very much like a regression.

The thing is, it wasn't obvious at first. You're going to find that when you get your dog to a stage where you can leave without worrying and you do it over and over and over again, it just becomes the new norm. You're not as in tune to your dog being alone. Now, this isn't going to happen quickly. I can't remember how long I kept checking Percy's, the Percy cam after we knew Percy was okay. But it was a long time that doesn't disappear in a matter of weeks. It was maybe months and months, probably longer, that I would still need to peek into Percy cam, both because I'd wanted to check, I always wanted to check, make sure he's okay, but also because of the little thrill it used to give me when I did check and then he was asleep. And what you'll find is the more you get used to him being okay on his own, the more he's used to being home alone on his own and being okay, the less you will check in. And the period between checking in, you might go months without checking in. So you kind of stop and I.

Say you become less in tune with what they're up to when you leave them. But that never entirely goes. Maybe it's because I'm a separation anxiety trainer, maybe that's why it never entirely goes. But I am always at the back of my mind, even subconsciously wondering, is he okay? Yeah. And I would say it's very, very buried. So that feeling of that thought, Is he okay? Is there in my brain somewhere? But for a long time, certainly until a few months ago. And we'll come on to what happened.

It was well buried, but it didn't mean that I was probably, again, subconsciously just looking out for how he was when we came back, that kind of stuff. But what happened a few months ago wasn't so

much a complete shock. It wasn't like the first time we discovered Percy had separation anxiety, which was when a neighbor let us know that he'd been barking all day. It was more of a dawning realization this time. A dawning realization that maybe something wasn't quite right when he was alone.

The first thing that alerted me to this was coming home. Not driving, but walking through the door, but hearing him barking before we got in. Now, Percy will bark when we come in because that's what he does. So excited to see us. He will bark. But I just started noticing that on two or three occasions he seemed to be barking before we got in. Now, alarm bells didn't start ringing at that stage because I had seen on camera so many times that if he heard us coming up the driveway and we've got, like, stones, I wouldn't say gravel, but we've got stones that we have to walk over to get into the house. And I'd seen enough on video years back that when we walk on those stones, sometimes he'll hear of us and start barking before we come in.

So initially I thought it was that, but you just and again, maybe it's because I spend my whole day, not literally 24/7, looking at dogs with separation anxiety, but maybe thinking about dogs with separation anxiety. Maybe because this is like what I do day in, day out. I was, yeah, just a bit more on edge about something not quite being there. He seemed a bit more worked up, but not anxious.

When we first discovered he had separation anxiety and we came back and he had been upset. So this is way before Percy cam. One of the things that was really obvious was he'd been drooling and then it would take him forever, forever to calm down. Like a ridiculously long amount of time. So I wasn't seeing this a few months ago, but it just didn't feel right. So what did I do? I do what I tell everybody to do if they've got the least bit of concern about their dog's homeland behavior.

I set up a camera and went out. Just did a normal, normal absence. But kept checking the camera didn't go too far, and it was quite a long duration, I seem to recall. I mean, we're not talking minutes, and it wasn't several hours, but looking back at my notes, I think it was about 40 minutes.

But he barked. So I come back, he's still barking. I was about ten minutes away. He's been barking for ten minutes. I come back, my worst fears are confirmed. Oh, my goodness. My dog's had a regression. My dog is no longer okay on his own. Imagine it. So we stopped leaving him. That was the first thing we did. After we sat with the camera again, we stopped leaving him because I needed some time to collect my thoughts, to work out what was going on. And as I say to everybody, to buy yourself time, the first thing you've got to do is you've got to stop leaving them.

And I'm racking my brains, as is my husband, like, why? And it's interesting because all of my clients in separation anxiety heroes will say, Why? Why did this happen? And I will always say, sometimes we know and sometimes we don't. But I can tell you, this is a really good reminder that when you don't know, it's just maddening. It's just crazy making you assume there has to be a reason. And as I just mentioned, sometimes there is and sometimes there isn't. But it's definitely worth investigating.

So I did the obvious rule outs, like pain. He does suffer from a bad back, but we're very on top of that. We have a great physio who helps us, and he gets medication, and we're really aware of the signs of pain in him. So what are the very specific things he does when he's more in pain? So, yeah, we ruled out that he was otherwise very healthy, fit and happy. His diet hadn't changed, his exercise hadn't changed, the weather hadn't changed. It was really, really difficult to know why this had happened.

And it's a very important question to ask. So if your dog's behavior suddenly changes, whether that's a dog who's home alone or whether it's a dog who is worried about people or reacts on the leash, if the behavior suddenly changes for the worse, ask, is there anything else in his life that could have changed? And then one night over dinner, my husband and I twigged the one thing that had changed in his world, and in fact, in our world, was that we had recently got new neighbors.

They moved in early in the summer, and before then, the house was very often empty and had been empty for quite some time. And when it wasn't empty, it was used by a couple who would just spend some weekends there. But there was a difference, because now we've got a family rather than a couple who were here occasionally, and we've got way more comings and goings.

So that's what we conclude. We think there's something about our new neighbors that is causing, is triggering, is making Percy respond in this way. So it's helpful to know what a trigger might be. But then you've got to really work out how is that affecting the behavior and then what can you do about it? So I went back and I looked at the recordings of the absences where he had started barking. So these are the recent ones, not from ten years ago. And immediately it was obvious to me there was a really big difference in the bark. There was a really big difference in what was going on.

When Percy used to get upset at being alone, he didn't bark from the outset. Well, not loudly. He would start with a really quite quiet, muffled, almost just like a one off little bark. In fact, that little bark became famous in our household because it was the bark that said, okay, we're not going out today. We got to really know that little of just it was just that sure, if he did that off, either when.

We were getting ready to go out or after we'd gone out, then we're coming back. And it was great because that little.

Off always led to full on howling. So it was a really good piece of data and it helped us progress training quicker because no longer were we guessing and leaving it too long and then he'd get into a howl. If we were doing training or an actual absence and we heard that hoof, we came back. So he wasn't doing this in these recordings earlier in the summer, he wasn't doing them.

The bark was immediately loud.

It was what I call a reactive bark. He's barking at something. He isn't just vocalizing to say, is anybody there? It's a response and it's a big explosive response. He's heard something, but I can't hear anything at all on the video, so I don't know what he's barking at. The doorbell hasn't gone, there's no car doors slamming. I can't hear anything, but it seems like he's really, really barking at something. Problem is, though, he's not stopping. So in the past he would be able to bark at a car door outside or the door going, and then settle down. He's not stopping. So this is different. And that's why I start to get really anxious, because this is new. He's now barking at something. We don't know what that something is, and he's not stopping. So then my husband and I chatted again.

Well, we were obsessed with this, let's be honest. We're talking about this over and over. It's like every day, most minutes of the day, we're thinking about this or chatting about this. We're crestfallen, we're sad for our boy, we're sad for us. And honestly, given what I do right now as my profession is pretty embarrassing, right? I've got a dog that suddenly can't be left and I don't know how to say this to you without sounding super unscientific, but I just didn't feel like it was the same as when he was really anxious though. So that was the only glimmer of hope that I had. And how can I tell you that? It's just when you really, really get to know your dog, and if you're a separation anxiety trainer and you've had a dog with separation anxiety, and you look at dogs with separation anxiety every single day, you really get to understand your own dog. And then one night my husband went out and he came back through the garage, garage door opened and Percy lost it explosive bark and couldn't stop barking.

Now this had become a fairly common reaction in say the last couple of years. Just Percy going, Dad's back, or if it's me going out, Mum's back. Yoo. And it's also what he would do if he heard us coming in, if we both went out, so he could be fast asleep on the sofa, like dead bugging on the sofa. And in fact he was. The night that this light bulb moment occurred for me, he's dead bugging on the sofa. But then he hears the garage go, he hears Jason come in and just so excited because he loves people, he loves it when people come into the house. He gets super excited. He's just got more and more excited barky in the last couple of years. It's just him as he gets older, he seems to just not be able to control his barking. And you know what I always say, he's twelve years old now, I'm fine with this impulsivity because he's not going to be with us that much longer. So if he wants to explode with joy every time people come in the house, so be it.

But of course now we're thinking, wait a minute, he's excited, he's really expectant is that what's going on? Got new neighbors, got more activity coming and going? Is this all it is? I mean, all we've still got to work out how we can deal with it. But is this what's triggering? Well, I needed to test it, but I wanted to test it safely. And the good news is there was an obvious way for me to test it and that was I was going to work out what time typically my neighbors would come and go and then I didn't need to leave Percy alone to test this, though I knew that one of us, or both of us could be there. I thought it would be more powerful if my husband went out. Because if my theory so here's my theory, let me tell you what my theory is. My theory is that our neighbors are making noises now that sound like one of us coming into the house. That gets Percy excited. He then can't calm down because he thinks, well where are you? And in fact I see this when say for example, we go out

for a mountain bike. I come into the house first and my husband continues to tinker in the garage on the bikes. And Percy won't calm down until Jason's come in. It's like, come on. And now you're in there, come and say hi to me. I'm so excited. So my theory here is that that's what's happening. He thinks that we're hanging out outside or in the garage and we're not coming in. And he's like, come in now and come and say hi. And the big difference between our new neighbors and the old neighbors was the number of times that they use the garage and the garage door. And we have the same garage doors because we're semis, we're attached homes, we have the same garage doors. So you can see my hypothesis, right? Percy's here in the garage door. He thinks it's our Gary's door, it's not, but he thinks we're there and he's like, come in. I'm so excited. Come back in. So I wanted to test it. So Jason went out and we waited and sure enough, Percy explodes with that.

Bark, bark, bark, bark, bark.

I looked out, I couldn't hear anything. I couldn't hear anything, but he clearly had. I looked out and I saw the neighbor's car, like, coming into the garage.

Yes, result. It's a result.

At least we've worked out what's going on.

He can't stop barking, he can't calm himself down because now he thinks my husband's coming in. Okay, so we know what's going on, but how am I going to work on it? I mean, big relief at this moment, big relief, because now I'm thinking, no, we haven't got a dog who's suddenly anxious of being left. We've got a dog who is now suddenly excited at all this extra activity outside. But now I've got a different problem to deal with.

Great.

No, but it's all doable. So what I did was, again, something that I encourage everyone to do if they've got a dog who reacts to outside noise. You just have to double down as much as you can on masking the outside noise because it's really hard, especially when you've got an impulsive dog like Percy. And like I say, he's just got more like this in the last couple of years. Maybe he's, maybe he's getting a little bit senile, who knows? But he certainly finds it harder to control his excitement these days. It's much easier to control the trigger than it is to control a dog who's super, super excited. And I can't hear the noise, but I'm going to assume that he's going to hear noises when we don't hear them.

So it was all about masking the noise, even though we thought we were already doing that. So layering the noise, adding a fan back into the equation, because we just had music on, adding some white noise on a different device, and that still wasn't helping. So we then did something which we hadn't done for a long time. I said, well, we've got to move him. He is separated. Percy and India are separated from text because they don't get on very well and we definitely don't want them all

being left together when we go out. And so Percy and India stay in one room, which is closer to the garage, so we realize they've got to be in the same room. It's a room that's further away from the garage, but it's the only way to save all our sanities, and that's what we did. This sounds really simple, doesn't it? There was a lot of thinking and a lot of heartache and a lot of up and down emotion to get here. But we figured it out, so we created text. We popped Indian Percy into the same room. We put a guard. A guard. We put an extra barrier around Texas crate, so there's no wandering up to Texas crate while he's in there. And we tested it out and guess what? He just slept through it all. We opened and closed the garage door, watched him on the camera, we left, we watched him on the camera, we went further, we watched him on the camera, he was out and that was it. Oh, my goodness.

That sounds way too simple, doesn't it? But it wasn't. It wasn't that simple. It was hard to work out. It was depressing and mortifying and upsetting because it could be it could have been that he'd regressed. It does happen. It would have been shocking if he had, but we had to be aware of the fact that it could have been. And luckily for us, it had a really, really good outcome. We worked through it and we were able to resolve everything by just changing up the environment, changing up the situation. If you find that your dog's having a regression, are you going to be able to fix it with just a few changes to the environment? Maybe not, but do, do what I did. Ask yourself, could anything have changed?

If you've been working with me in Separation Anxiety Heroes and you've been using my Be Right Back training app, you will have been taking notes on each session. You can look back and see, has anything changed? Now? For us, it's been a long time since we've needed to do any training with Percy, so the data wasn't in front of us. We got into forensic mode when we realized there was a problem going on. So ask yourself, could anything have changed? If anything could have changed, then try and isolate the variable. So if you think two or three things have changed, work out, is it this one? Is it that one? Is it the other one? And when you hit a regression, don't panic.

If your dog has been acing long times for a considerable amount of time, the chances are it's going to be just like it was with Percy. It's going to be temporary, and you will get your dog back. You're not going back to square one. It is just a case of working through it and sticking with it. So I hope that's given you a little bit of insight into what it's like to have a dog who's been recovered from separation anxiety for a long time, who then scares the heck out of you because there's a wobble and how you just have to stay calm, get forensic, and work your way through it. Good luck with the training. You've got this.

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 JulienSmith.com. Meanwhile, if you enjoyed listening today, I would love it if you would head over to wherever you listen to your podcasts and consider rating my show. Thanks so much. Good luck with that training, and bye for now.