

## Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

### Episode 080 Transcript –What Do We Really Mean by Evidence and Why Does That Matter

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-80/>

A couple of episodes back, I talked about board and Train facilities, and I discussed why it's a really bad idea to take your dog to Board and Train if you've got a dog with separation anxiety. Now, lots of people found that episode really valuable, but I wasn't entirely surprised that I got a ton of pushback about that episode, too. So people were rude. Some people trolled me, but some people genuinely wanted to know how I could make that assertion. How could I say that board and train was a bad idea for dogs with separation anxiety?

Now, I'm an evidence based practitioner. That sounds really fancy, doesn't it? But what it means is that when I give you advice, I want it to be on the basis of evidence. So that can be research and it can be studies. And I need to tell you whether I can really concretely say that's, so or whether it's an opinion or whether well, you know, we don't really know. So I'm really upfront about the evidence behind what advice I give you. But here's the thing. Evidence does matter, but there's no research. There's no research study that says board and train is bad for dogs with separation anxiety. So was I being flaky? Am I a charlatan for saying it's bad news for dogs to take me to Board and Train? Well, here's the thing. Absence of evidence doesn't always mean evidence of absence. And in this podcast, I dig into why.

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.

I'm an evidence based practitioner and evidence based trainer, and I am incredibly proud of that. I think it's important. I think we should all be anybody who's working with dogs, who is giving advice to dog guardians, anybody that you employ to give you advice, you should know that the advice they're giving you is based on everything we know about dogs and how dogs learn. And what does it mean, though? What does it specifically mean to be an evidence based anything? Well, here's a definition for you. Evidence based practice is the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about care.

Now, this is taken from healthcare, but evidence based practice is used in healthcare, in veterinary practice, it's used in psychology, it's used in all professions where advice is given to help a subject. And so we're always trying to look for evidence research studies in order to put forward an

evidence based approach. But what happens when there isn't a specific study? I mean, there's a ton of research in dog training and increasingly so canine research is a very popular topic, but that doesn't mean to say there will always be a specific study for a specific situation. And sometimes not having a study is a problem, but sometimes it's not a problem.

Here's when it is a problem. It's a problem when, say, somebody comes along and says, hey, I've got a brand new cure for separation anxiety. And we're all like, really? And they say to us, yeah, and yeah, you can't be suspicious of my cure. I mean, just because it's proven doesn't mean to say it doesn't work. There's no evidence to suggest that my brand new cure doesn't work. So saying that you've got a brand new approach, an approach that doesn't fit with anything that's gone before in the past, that just isn't consistent with anything that we know about a particular topic, you can't just claim that this works without the evidence.

However, let's talk about when not having evidence isn't so much of a problem. And it's not a problem when a method, a method that's based on all that we know, the wide body of evidence up to this point, when a method fits in with all of that. Now, an additional study would be great, but we can also use this concept, and it's called prior probability. And prior probability in a way, kind of breaks the rule that unproven is incorrect, that we should always prove things. I mean, yes, we should always, if we can look to research to back up a claim, but if that claim fits with everything we know and all the evidence we have today, and if there's no new study, we don't need to dismiss that claim. But if the claim is completely inconsistent with everything that we know, then that's when it's a problem that we don't have any new evidence.

So this concept of prior probability means that unproven doesn't always mean false or wrong. We do need to be careful though, that's not getting people off the hook. It doesn't allow people to make claims that have no foundation because evidence does matter. And the problem I find in separation anxiety training in the world of dog separation anxiety, is that all too often claims are made over and over again about treatments or new training methods for which there's simply no evidence, even with taking prior probability, the concept of prior probability into account.

I follow a blog called Skept VI skept vet. And Skepvet is Brennan Mackenzie. He's got that fantastic blog. I'll link to it in the Show Notes, and he's also written a book called Placebo for Pets. And in his blog he's written a fantastically detailed article about this concept of evidence, absence of evidence, prior probability. So I'll link to not only his overall blog, but the specific blog too, in my show Notes.

So I want to use some of the concepts that he sets out because he explains this idea way better than I could he explains what prior probability is, why it matters, how it's helpful, and when it's not. So, just to remind ourselves, if we are talking about evidence, and if you're a practitioner, if you're a trainer like me, and you focus on evidence and you're an evidence based practitioner, the onus is always on us if we make a claim to substantiate that claim, if there's no prior probability. So if you're a dog guardian and you're being told about a training method or a brand new supplement or

a new device, you can say, well, how do you know this works? And a good answer isn't, well, there's been nothing to prove that it doesn't work.

Now, in the blog that I mentioned, Brennan Mackenzie gives a fantastic example. He talks about somebody come along, coming along, and claims that they have a fire breathing invisible dragon living at the bottom of their garden. Now, hang on a minute. I am not going to do a study to prove that someone doesn't have a fire breathing invisible dragon living at the bottom of their garden. So if that person making the claim, then says, AHA, you can't produce any evidence to suggest that I don't have a fire breathing invisible dragon in my garden, then I shouldn't go on the back foot. Why? Well, let's think about it. We know that dragons don't exist. They just don't. And then we know invisibility isn't a thing either. So we've got two major issues there. We've got invisibility and we've got dragons. And then on top of that, we've got fire breathing what creature? Fire breathes.

So can you see how I don't need to prove that this fire breathing invisible dragon doesn't exist? The person claiming it needs to produce the evidence to show that it does exist. And Skeptic Brennan Mackenzie goes on to share some other great examples. So he talks about three examples. Here, let me go through them. Wearing a parachute if you're about to jump out of a plane looking left and right or right and left, depending on where you are in the world when you're about to cross a road or getting kids to do that. Or if you've just been in a traffic incident, if you've just been in a collision and you've been hurt badly in a road traffic accident, that you actually wait. Call an Uber. And don't think about calling an ambulance.

Now, as he points out, there aren't any clinical trials. There aren't any studies that show all of these three things are the right things to do. There aren't any studies that show that if you do any of these three things, you're less likely to get injured, you're less likely to die. But we follow them anyway. Why? Because the rationality of following these processes, these practices comes from this high prior probability concept. They aren't just some out of the blue notion. They're based on well established approaches, methods, principles on how we do things.

But let's take those three examples and show when we might want to see some evidence. He talks about using the force to detect oncoming cars rather than looking left and right, right and left, calling on spiritual energy when you jump out of a plane in order to fly, rather than using a parachute and yeah, getting on your phone, going to your Uber account, looking for the nearest cab instead of calling nine nine one for an ambulance when you've been injured in a road traffic accident.

So we'd avoid doing all of these, wouldn't we? And there isn't a study, there's no study that says if you jump out of a plane and try to fly using your spiritual energy, how does that impact your likelihood to survive? There aren't any studies showing that, but nobody's doing that. Nobody's jumping out of a plane trying to fly. They're untested and unproven.

And if you are making that claim that actually you can give somebody spiritual energy that enables them to fly when they jump out of a plane, you definitely need to be doing the provision of research. You definitely need to be the one proving your case. Anyway, fantastic article. I highly recommend you read it. You can find the links in the show notes, but I want to just go back to the board and train issue and why this all links together?

So why didn't I produce a study? Why did I actually respond that I wasn't going to and I didn't need to? What was I thinking? Well, let's look at what we know about dogs with separation anxiety. And by the way, for which we do have evidence, first of all, number one, separation anxiety is absolutely best treated with gradual exposure to departures. Again, you're probably saying, how do you know that? I won't go into the detail of the research. I will link to research in the show notes. There's going to be a lot of links in the show notes here, but for those of you out there clamoring for the research and so you should I'll link to it.

Number two, dogs with separation anxiety also have issues with being confined. Not every single dog, but plenty of dogs do. Number three, many dogs with separation anxiety also struggle with separation from their owners. Depending on the study that you look at, that can be around 20% to 30%. So not only do they hate being alone, but they're petrified, they panic, they get frantic when one of their few significant people aren't around.

Number four, you don't resolve separation anxiety quickly and that kind of links to number one, we know that with animal brains when we're trying to use gradual exposure. It isn't a quick fix, it just isn't. It's a tried and trusted method, but it absolutely takes time. And number five, learning happens in context, particularly learning as it relates to changing an association.

There's lots of study of this and the world of neuroscience and what we know about how a brain changes the neuroplasticity plasticity I can never say that word. The neuroplasticity of brains, the thinking and the learning has come along a lot in the last 20 years. So we know that brains can change. We know that certain factors really affect the ability of the brain to change. And a big one is context. And one of the biggest contexts in learning is location, where you learn. So all of the above is well documented.

And now let's look at so we know, we know that all these things are the right considerations when we're thinking about getting a dog over separation anxiety. But let's look at how board and train particularly short two to three week stints in board and train, let's look at how that typically works for dogs with separation anxiety.

First of all, we've got separation from owners. Now, that might not be an issue for all of the dogs with separation anxiety, but we're going to have a lot of dogs who have problems with that two to three weeks. If you're sending your dog off to board and train and they're talking about getting your dog over separation anxiety in two to three weeks, that's way too quick. That just doesn't

resolve gradual exposure doesn't get a dog over separation anxiety in two to three weeks. It just doesn't it's a different location. It's a different context. It's a majorly different context.

So even if, even if capital I, capital F, even if a dog did recover, I'll put that in quotes from separation anxiety in a board and train context, that board and train context, that board and train location isn't your home. And so the whole premise of sending a dog away quickly, getting them over separation anxiety, it just doesn't fit with everything we know about the best approach to treating separation anxiety humanely and ethically.

And that's why, despite initially thinking, oh, wait a minute, I need to go on the back foot here, I need to think about this. That's why it's not down to me to prove that board and train doesn't work for dogs with separation anxiety. The burden of proof is on anyone making that claim because it doesn't fit with a body of evidence. There's no prior probability. And even if you are, or even if you're working with a trainer who claims they can get your dog over separation anxiety in two to three weeks, ask them what methods they're using.

Because gradual exposure doesn't take two to three weeks, it takes longer. If somehow they do manage to get your dog over separation anxiety in two to three weeks, the onus is on them to prove that they didn't flood your dog or they didn't create some kind of learned helplessness. And what does that mean? Well, with flooding, it's another type of exposure therapy where instead of gradually exposing using desensitization, what we do is we expose the subject to the maximum, the maximum of the fear inducing stimulus. So with a dog, with separation anxiety, you would just leave it to cry it out day after day after day after day until eventually it gives up.

Now, flooding does work with some human patients. And the reason it works is that people are exposed to the fear inducing thing, but they come out the other side and they work with a therapist. They talk through their experience, and there's a lot of rationalizing of, oh, okay, so I came through that plane journey, or that plane, that flight, and I survived. And it wasn't as awful as I thought it was going to be. It was horrific, but I'm here, we've landed it's. Okay.

But most therapists aren't using flooding these days because it's horrible process to go through. It's very risky because it does risk over sensitizing and not resolving, and it requires patient consent. And lots of people just say, I don't want to go through that, give me the gradual approach.

So with a dog, we haven't got the ability as far as we know, a dog doesn't have the ability to rationalize how it feels. Dogs, as far as we know, don't think about thinking or don't think about feeling. So they're not going to come to the end of two to three weeks hold up in a board and train operation with no contact with humans. Sorry, that's being extreme. Of course that's not going to happen in a board and train.

What I mean is isolated, so isolated and not 24/7 with somebody, they're not going to come to the end of that experience and go, oh wow, it was horrific, but I survived. So yeah, maybe being on my

own isn't so bad because they don't do that cognition. They're not with a therapist talking it through. And even if there's so many even ifs in this podcast, I know that, but even if it did work, how horrific? And we're not asking patient consent and do you want your dog to go through that?

No, you don't. You want your dog to get through separation anxiety in the most humane and ethical way using the process that's tried and trusted. And another thing that can often happen, and I see this a lot, is that dogs just give up. So they're not any less scared of being left. They've just given up fighting. They don't bark, they don't cry because nobody comes. And then that's a concept called learned helplessness.

So this whole debate that went on was a real eye opener for me, and it was a good reminder that for too long, I think I've been on the back foot about always providing research. Why? Because I'm committed to using evidence based methods. So I think I always need to come up with them. And I would always scramble around trying to essentially prove that the fire breathing dragon in the garden doesn't exist. I kept doing that. Okay, so you're telling me that your training method, which is really a fire breathing dragon in the garden, is working.

So what can I get my hands on to prove that you're wrong, that it's not the case from now on? I'm not going to do that, though, because science is never settled and it's never 100% proven. But if you're suggesting, or someone is suggesting a different way to get a dog over separation anxiety, then I want proof. I want them to provide the proof. And if they provide the proof, goodness knows what that might look like, because it would be anecdotal, I'm certain, and it would be N of one or N of two at best.

But even if there was a study, even if there was, I would also want to know, well, how is that happening? How are you getting dogs over separation anxiety in two to three weeks? Are you using a humane, ethical method to do that? So if the method that is being proposed, the method that challenges gradual exposure, if that method isn't backed by the concept of prior probability, then the burden of proof is 100% on the person making that claim.

And if board and train really does work for dogs with separation anxiety, then those people running board and train operations need to demonstrate that they have to provide the proof. It's their responsibility. And just as importantly as showing that it does work, they need to show that they are using a humane and ethical approach. I hope you found this episode useful and maybe a bit thought provoking. Tons of links in the show notes. Thank you for listening as ever, and I look forward to catching 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.

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