

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 083 Transcript – 4 Reasons Force-Free is the Only Choice for Separation Anxiety Training

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-083/>

When we work with dogs, we should always remember that they're sentient beings, they have feelings, they feel pain, they have emotions, and they get anxious. And I'm hundred percent more than 100% committed to training dogs without fear, without pain, and without intimidation. But I think whatever training we're doing, we should always be taking a force free approach. We shouldn't be coercing them, we shouldn't be punishing them. But I'm especially passionate that we should take this approach when we work with separation anxiety. And that's why in this podcast episode, I'm going to go into the four reasons why I think it's absolutely critical that we should always take a force free approach with our separation anxiety dogs.

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 whether it's separation anxiety training or another form of training, we really need to treat dogs with kindness and without cruelty, then that means using training that doesn't coerce them, compulse them, and doesn't use anything that the dog finds aversive. Research studies consistently show that we can train dogs effectively without the need to resort to punishment. So if we've got a choice between harsh methods that are unpleasant and aversive to a dog versus methods that the dog finds either delightful or at least is fine with, then why don't we choose the latter?

And with separation anxiety for a long time, there are trainers and websites that recommend that we use processes and methods that dogs will find unkind and harsh. But we don't need to do that. And in fact, the best way of getting a dog over separation anxiety is by using a gradual exposure technique. And gradual exposure takes something that a dog is scared of, and we can use gradual exposure with any brain. But let's talk about a dog. It takes something that the dog is scared of, and it dials that thing, the scary thing, the intensity of the scary thing, right down to a level that no longer scares the dog.

With home alone training, that's time home alone. So we dial down the intensity of the home alone time by starting at seconds, or maybe by starting with just desensitizing the dog to the door. And the key rule as we go through the training is, is the dog okay with it? Now, admittedly, we're not

using food rewards or toys or fun stuff with desensitization. What we're doing is actually we're kind of boring a dog. Boring a dog into going, oh, do you know what? I'm just going to go over here and sleep it out. But we're equipping a dog with a critical skill, the skill to be home alone without being scared. And we do it gently and we go at the dog's pace and we never go too far too fast and we don't push a dog into a fearful state. In fact, if we do that, then we're doing the training all wrong. So it's force free all the way.

All the way for separation anxiety training. But what do we mean by force free? Well, force free means that I am not going to compel a dog. I am not going to use something the dog inherently dislikes, something the dog finds disgusting, painful, scary, uncomfortable or punishing. Force exists all around us. It's true. When I put a leash on a dog, I'm using some oppositional force to stop a dog from running into the road. When I close the door on the dog, I'm using the force of the door, the door between the dog and the outside world to stop the dog from DoorDashing is true. And when I put the loaf of bread high upon a shelf out of the way of techs who has an uncanny ability to stretch for any food that I leave on the counter when I put the loaf out of the way. I'm relying on the force of gravity to stop him from being able to jump up that high, because even with even with all his might, he can't jump that high because gravity is going to stop him.

So, yeah, there is force all the time. But the difference between those kind of forces and the force of using a shot collar that hurts or using harsh words with the dog, or using a prong collar, these are completely different things. Those types of forces intend to create an uncomfortable, a scared, an intimidated response from the dog. So force free training is that we don't do any of that.

Am I forcing a dog to be home alone? Well, that's a good argument because by choice, very few dogs, practically no dog would vote to be home alone. However, what I'm doing isn't forcing a scared dog to stay at home by locking the door on him and then going away, going out, or even worse, locking him in a crate. What I'm doing is I'm helping him cope. So, yes, he's not going to sign up for being home alone, but he can tolerate it. He can get to a state where he finds it just a neutral thing.

So it's not aversive with a dog who's got separation anxiety, being home alone is aversive. So actually what we're doing is changing something that's aversive for the dog into something that the dog finds doesn't care about because it has no consequence in the dog's life. It becomes neutral and that's what gradual exposure does. It takes something that the dog finds scary and aversive and it changes it into something that the dog just goes about.

And that's why, that's why we need to keep thinking about force free when it comes to separation anxiety training and all training. But for the purpose of this podcast episode, separation anxiety training, here are the four big reasons why we take a force free approach for the training that we do.

Reason number one, you can't treat fear with fear. I mean, doesn't that sound really obvious when you say that? When I say that, I just think, oh, well, that sounds ridiculous. Of course, of course. Nobody would think about treating fear with fear. Well, yeah, except there are approaches and there are methods that are designed to get a dog, quote, comfortable with alone time by first scaring them.

And that method is called flooding. And what that does is it exposes a dog to the maximum intensity of the thing that it's scared of, and it keeps that intensity up until the dog kind of gives up and just goes, oh, okay. Now, the thing about flooding is that it is sometimes still used in human therapy, but it's often not optive for because it is so horrendous. So think about it. Think about if there's anything in the world that you're scared of. Think about being exposed to it at maximum intensity, turning that fear right up.

And with a human patient, we can ask, we can say, are you okay with this method? It's going to be deeply unpleasant, very uncomfortable. Oh, and by the way, risky too, because it might mean that you aren't okay. In fact, you could be worse. But with a dog, we can't get their consent. We can't explain to them that what we're going to do is just leave you home alone, crying and howling for as many hours or as many days or as many weeks as it takes until you just accept being home alone. Sign here, if you're okay with that process. Well, we don't ask them.

We can't ask them. And the problem is that with a human patient, when they come to the end of an exposure, that's at the highest intensity. So a flooding session, they can talk to their therapist, their therapist can say, so how did that feel? You obviously came out the other side and you're still okay, right? But we can't have that reasoned discussion with the dog. Oh, yes, you were at home alone for 8 hours. But look, the worst thing that happened was you felt a bit scared, but the world is still turning and the sky didn't fall on your head. It's fine, isn't it?

So, no wonder flooding risks making dogs worse. It's deeply unpleasant, it's deeply petrifying for the dog. It's unethical and it's inhumane. And that's why we use gradual exposure. We don't flood. We gently expose the dog to home alone time.

Reason number two, you can't punish out anxiety. Again, when I make that statement, I think, well, doesn't everybody think that because it's so obvious, right? Well, sadly, no. Some people think that you can punish fearful dogs and expect a different outcome, a better outcome. But remember, if your anxious dog is chewing or destroying or defecating when you leave, their behavior is being driven by their emotion. Their behavior is being driven by fear.

However, some trainers advocate that you put a bark collar on your dog. And what's a bark collar? It's a shock collar. Let's just call it what it is. It's a shock collar. It's a shock collar that's activated by your dog barking. So your scared dog barks. Barks because presumably he is calling for help or he wants to escape, or it just makes him feel a bit better during his terrifying or teal. So he barks, but

now he's got a shot collar in him. So when he barks, the shot collar goes off. It creates pain. And your dog thinks, oh, okay, so what do I do now?

So the dog's doing something really natural, but it's had the addition of an electric shock for doing something that he thought was really natural. He doesn't feel any better about being left. He's now just trying to work out why he's getting this painful shock going through his neck.

And another tool that's often recommended for dogs at home alone is a citronella collar, also used for barking. And citronella sounds so lovely, doesn't it? It's lemons. And lemons make us think of summer and puddings and iced drinks. But to dogs, the smell of lemon is disgusting. Disgusting smell and taste of lemon, to a dog, is about as disgusting as it gets.

And that's why citronella collars are a thing, because they release an odor that the dog finds disgusting. And of course, the dog wants to avoid that happening again, so it will try to work out why did that happen. But remember, your dog's doing something that he or she thinks is natural the destroying or the chewing. She thinks it's normal to bark when she's alone and she's still scared. She's now just dealing with this disgusting smell and trigger alert. Think about it.

Think about having vomit sprayed into your face. I'm sorry, I told you it would be triggering vomit sprayed into your face every time you did something that you thought was normal but that somebody else had judged as being wrong. Wouldn't that be horrible? Wouldn't it be confusing? That's all that's happening with the citronella collar.

So it's as harsh and as horrible as a shot collar. And punishing, trying to punish that barking doesn't change a dog's underlying motivation. The dog is still scared. Same with crates. All a crate will do at best is contain the behavior. I mean, a crate won't stop a dog barking, but it might stop a dog from chewing or destroying, provided that the dog doesn't escape. And then, okay, you might say, well, what about indestructible crates?

Yeah, the problem with indestructible crates is often they're not. And even if they are, they're harming the dog's brain by imprisoning a dog in its fear. So crates, citronella collars, bark collars, they're all designed to, at best, punish behavior, but they don't work on the underlying motivation for that behavior, the fear that your dog feels when your dog is home alone.

Number three. Reason number three, your dog isn't being bad. I know you know this. I hope you know this. And I totally get, I 100% get it is devastating, devastating to have a dog who barks all day, to have a dog who destroys your things. And I have so been there. It's life altering, isn't it? Isn't it? When you have a dog who barks so loud and so long that you're in danger of getting kicked out of your apartment or where you can't have anything nice or even vaguely nice because your dog just destroys it.

But when your dog is scared and is barking at home on his own because he's scared or he's destroying, because the destruction either helps him think he's going to escape or it just feels better because he's scared, he's not being bad. He's doing it because of his fear. He's not coping. And those behaviors are just something that he needs to do.

And that's why we shouldn't be suppressing those behaviors with forceful methods, with punishment. Because the way to stop those behaviors, the way to stop the destruction or the barking or the howling, is to help your dog feel better about being left. So the force free, kind and gentle alternative to punishing away those responses is to gradually get him used to being alone, help him feel better about being left.

So if somebody's giving you advice about, here's how you fix the barking, or, oh, look, I've got a really good idea that's going to stop your dog from chewing. You're going to put this spray all over the furniture, legs, and by the way, bitter apple spray, it works a bit like citronella, not quite the same way, but it's a horrible, disgusting taste to your dog. So it works in an aversive way. It works because it's disgusting to your dog. A much better way to stop your dog from doing those things is to focus on the behavior.

So if somebody is telling you, here's how you stop barking, here's how you stop chewing, and they aren't talking about getting to your dog's underlying fear, then what they're doing is they're going to be punishing your dog for their behaviors. And you know it your dog's not being bad. Your dog is just responding in a way that is normal for a dog who's scared.

Reason number four, aversive can actually make fear worse, right? So you've been told to use a bark collar. I'm going to stop calling a bark collar a shot collar. You've been told to use a shot collar or a citronella collar. You've been told to use an indestructible crate, which the dog finds highly aversive because it locks him in his panic. It contains him with his panic. You've been told to put lemon or spray bitter apple spray everywhere.

And now what we've got is a situation where when your dog is home alone, not only is he petrified of being alone, but really bad things happen too. So he goes into his indestructible crate and you only put him in there when you go out, or when you want him to stay in there, despite his protestations. So he knows that going in there is bad news, because it means he has to stay there no matter how badly he feels about being in there.

Or the shot collar, the shot collar that only goes off when he's home alone because you use it when he barks and he barks when he's home alone. So now he's thinking, oh, my goodness. When you go out, not only is it really, really horrible because I get so frightened, but I don't know what happens because this thing I get this pain in my neck, and it just seems to happen when you go out. So please don't go out because it's so awful when you go out.

So can you see what we've done? We've taken a fearful dog, we've tried to address the fearful behaviors by punishing them away. All we've done is made the dog even more fearful. We've compounded the fear by adding something that the dog is scared of, that the dog hates, that the dog finds unpleasant, disgusting or aversive. And we do that to them when we go out. So now they dread you going out even more.

And the thing about fear, as you are no doubt finding, if you're working through separation anxiety, training is it's hard to change. So once a dog's brain has imprinted with fear, it's not impossible to change, not at all, because brains are plastic. At any age, a brain can change, but fear is the hardest response to change. It's the hardest thing for a dog to lose. And so adding fear into the mix, for a fearful dog, not only is that unethical and unkind, but we've just made everything harder for everyone involved.

So what's a force free alternative? We're going to ditch the crate. Protect your stuff rather than your crate. So put things around the things that are precious to you. Keep your dog under threshold so that he doesn't want to bark in the first place. Do the training using a camera. I always say when you're doing separation outside of training, you're going to use a camera. And the great advantage of using a camera, well, the reason I recommend it is so that you can spot any signs of rising anxiety in your dog.

But on top of that, if you miss those subtle signs of anxiety and you suddenly see your dog start to go for the doorframe and looking like he's going to rip it apart, well, you come straight back in. So your stuff isn't going to get ruined, you come in if your dog is even so much thinking about barking, so your neighbors are going to be happy. And on top of all that, because you're doing gentle, kind, gradual exposure, the ethical and effective way to train, you're not adding to your dog's fear. You're doing exactly the opposite. You're addressing the cause of his anxiety driven behaviors.

So can you see why then? Now, I've gone through all those four reasons. It's just a non negotiable. We don't train fearful dogs with things they find aversives. As I say, we shouldn't train any dog with Aversives when it comes to separation anxiety. Think about it. Think about what would happen if you did train with Aversives and take them off the table. I promise you that you won't just be doing something that's ethical, kind, and humane, but you'll be doing something that makes life better for your dog and for you.

Thank you so much for listening. I appreciate you taking the time to listen to my podcast. I know you've got lots of choices, but I look forward to you joining me on the next one. Bye for now.

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of the Be Right Back separation anxiety podcast.

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