

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 090 Transcript – How to Take the Pressure off and Prevent Training Burnout

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-090/>

In the last episode, I talked about what you should do if you feel like giving up. But in this episode, on a kind of similar theme all about helping you through when it gets difficult, I want to talk to you about what you should do or what can help when you don't want to give up. Even though you feel like giving up, but you just feel burnt out and you feel like the pressure is too much. So that's why in this week's episode, we're tackling my five tips to help you feel less burnt out about the training so that hopefully you don't want to give up.

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.

Let's dive in. First of all, my first tip for you if you're feeling burnt out by this training is stop thinking about an end goal. I mentioned this a bit in the last episode and it's such an important point. I know that kind of seems weird because after all, the reason you're doing separation anxiety training is so that you can get your dog to be able to be alone for a reasonable amount of time.

And I find that everybody's goal here can be slightly different. Some people are thinking it's got to be 6 hours because that's how it's going to work. With my workday, we're going to get somebody to come in at lunchtime. And so I need my dog to be able to do the 6 hours between when I leave in the morning and when I get the pet sitter or the dog walker to come in at lunchtime. Okay, but for other people, it's 2 hours or maybe even an hour. Wherever you're at, you've probably got a time in mind where you say, you know, if I can just get X time, if I can just get an hour, it means I can go to the gym. If I can just get 2 hours, it means I can go round to my mum's for lunch next weekend even though I can't take my dog because of the cats.

So whatever that time is, you've probably got a goal like that in your head. And I'm not saying don't have those dreams because the dreams are what keep us going often, but sometimes, oftentimes those big goals actually hold us back. And they hold us back because they can seem so far away. And they hold us back because of the pressure. It piles on us. If you're working to six minutes with your dog's separation anxiety training, but your ultimate goal is 6 hours, you can just feel so overwhelmed and so far off and so crushed by the thought of how long it might take you that you just feel like you never want to do the training.

So it doesn't mean don't dream, but it does mean that you should adjust your focus, adjust your goals from the big, lofty, ambitious goal, kind of keep that in your head somewhere. It's okay to have that dream about that. But then when you're training, you keep your goals tiny, you keep them small. And you really want to focus on the process of training rather than the ultimate endgame. Now, research shows that when we do that, when we're undergoing a really big complex change that takes time, that only shows very tiny results in the short term, that we should just focus on what we do right now and not that big lofty, top of the mountain goal.

So for separation anxiety training, what that means is you focus on having a good session today. Every time you have a quality session where you get out of the door without your dog getting upset and you come back without your dog getting upset, you've just helped change your dog's association of being left, which is what we're all about. With gradual exposure, it might be a tiny change and most likely it's a tiny change that you can't see today, but it's the sum of all those tiny changes. That's what leads to that goal. That's what gets you to the top of the mountain.

So this week when you're training, just think about, did I have a good session today? Did I have a good session yesterday? How am I going to make sure I have a good session tomorrow? So think quality. In some ways I wish in lots of ways I wish we didn't have a clock running when we were doing separation anxiety training because it really makes us focus on time. It makes us focus on 6 seconds or six minutes or 6 hours and it becomes an obsession. Of course it does. And the way I teach you to do the separation anxiety training is to focus on time. Because time helps us judge how we did. But it's not everything.

So if you think that six minutes is going to be too much for your dog today, it's way better. Instead of pushing through and thinking, but if I don't do six minutes a day, I'm never going to get to 6 hours. It's way better just to say, what time can my dog do today? Comfortably, without stress, without taxing my dog so that I can get that successful session in. So that's what happens when you focus on the process. You just focus on today, maybe yesterday, maybe tomorrow, but really not much farther ahead than that. Focus on what you do, how well you do it. Focus on the tiny, tiny steps that you need to make. And it's all those tiny changes that ultimately lead up to you achieving that longer goal.

So my first tip, stop thinking about the ultimate goal. Keep that in your mind, dream about it, dream big, but keep the training small. My second tip, don't do the maths or don't do the math, depending on where you are. What does she mean by that? It's all about numbers, isn't it? Well, yes and no. And this is kind of linked to the first goal. So what we can do, what we often do, and I see it all the time with my clients in Separation Anxiety Heroes, is we do do the math.

Here's what I mean by that. So let's say your goal is 2 hours and you've been training for two months. Now, we know that with changing a brain, especially when it comes to changing an association like fear, that early progress is really slow because we are fighting against a really powerful response, which is fear. We're trying to change your dog's response from fear to oh, okay, neutral. And that is a big shift. That takes a lot of repetitions of you going out of the door, takes a lot of quality sessions, the quality sessions I was talking about in tip number one. And it takes you doing that over and over again.

When you first start out training, you will feel like you're not getting anywhere very often. You feel like you're just almost just flatlining, like your progress just looks really flat. And so you might get to the end of the two months and you could be at three minutes, you're like, what? Hang on, this training is not working three minutes after two months and then you get your calculator out or you do it in your head or you get a spreadsheet out and you go, okay, so if it's taking me two months to get to three minutes, I'm going to be 80. I'm going to be 80 by the time my dog gets this. So you are not allowed to do the maths.

I say that to all my clients. Don't do the maths because it doesn't work like that. Yes, the progress at the start of your training will be very, very flat looking, but that's not to say that there isn't a huge change going on in your dog's brain. There is. Your dog, every time you go out of the door, has had a brand new experience, a fear free experience of being left. That's a huge change. That's massive. It's just that it takes a lot of those for your dog to start feeling overall comfortable. Oh, wait a minute. Okay, so, yeah, she used to go out and it was scary, but now it seems like when she goes out, it's absolutely fine. Yeah, I've got this.

It takes a lot of repetition till your dog starts going, okay. And as that learning cements, the more you go out the door, the more that learning does cement, then the quicker well, not quicker. Let's not use the word quick. Then the more you'll see your progress start to tick up. So expect a flat looking line at the start of your training and don't do the math, because it isn't like that when people work. In my separation Anxiety heroes group. We work with my be right back training app. And the Be Right Back Training app has one of the features is showing people their progress line.

Once a week, we'll do a competition where we get people to share their progress, just to say, you know, how are you doing? No expectations, no big lofty goals. Just, how are you doing this week? And I get people to share the screen of their progress line, and it looks exactly how I've described to you. Not a lot happening at the start, even though there is a lot happening in your dog's brain, but it doesn't look like a lot is happening when we look at the chart, even though progress is definitely being made. But then we start to see that uptick. So if you're guilty of doing the math or the maths, I want you to stop. Do you have a deal on that?

Okay, number three, you need to stop telling yourself that you're cheating. What do I mean by cheating? Well, I don't mean that you're making up the numbers and putting them into your worksheet, or if you're one of my clients, putting fake numbers into the app. I don't mean that

because why would you do that by cheating? What I mean is when people say, my dog seems to do better in the evenings after daycare. But that's cheating, right? If I only train, then I know. Why is that cheating? You've just identified a context in which your dog does better. You've just identified a context in which this training seems to be easier for your dog than other times. Making something easier isn't cheating. Making something easier is setting your dog up for success or setting any learner up for success.

There's a reason why when people learn to drive, they don't learn to drive on the highway or motorway, right? That would be ridiculous. When people learn to drive, they often learn to drive on quiet industrial estates at the weekend or very, very quiet back streets where there aren't huge junctions, there aren't double lanes. That's where people learn to drive, right? And then the better you get, the more you progress to busier areas, to busier roads, and then eventually you go onto a highway or motorway, but you don't learn to drive there. That's not cheating, right? Oh, it's fine. I can drive. Imagine a learner driver who six months into training saying, oh, it's cheating because I can do this. I can do all of this, but I can only do it on a really quiet side street. Well, imagine the driving instructor saying, yeah, that is cheating. That's totally cheating. That's just ridiculous conversation, isn't it that wouldn't happen. That is just about learning progress.

The driving instructor is going to say, of course you're going to start there. We will get to the busier roads, we will get to faster moving traffic when you're ready. And it's the same with dog training. We don't teach puppies to sit at the park. That's not where we start anyway. We start in the living room, we start in the kitchen, we start when they are up for training, we don't start when they're distracted, when they want to run around squeaking their toy. And we definitely don't teach them to sit the first time at the park. We will get there. So it's the same with separation anxiety training. Don't ever say to yourself this is cheating. If you find a context where your dog finds being left easier, finds the training easier, celebrate it, embrace it and make the most of it. Because it's not cheating, it's learning. If your dog can start this home alone training, start the learning of being left in a context that just sets them up for success way better, then start there. Don't fight against it and definitely don't accuse yourself or your dog of cheating. It's just sensible.

My fourth tip here, don't make training a job. And especially don't make it feel like a job that you hate. I know you're driven. You probably wouldn't be listening to this podcast if you weren't driven and you weren't focused on trying to get your dog over separation anxiety.

And when I think about the members in my separation anxiety heroes group, they are all driven crazy. So sometimes I think, wow, look at the energy, look at the commitment. And that's great. And we need that commitment and we need drive. Of course we do.

Because it's not like we are getting up in the morning and saying, whoa, who. Separation anxiety training is the number one thing I want to do today because I love it. Oh, I love it. I just love it. Right? No. Who says that?

We say, I love going for a long, leisurely, off leash walk with my dog, or I love it when we go to the park and he meets up with all his doggy friends, or I love taking her to Agility at so much fun. Those are the sorts of things we say about our dog. Those are the things we find fun, but not honestly, hand on heart, who is finding separation anxiety training fun? It's not fun. I know it's not.

And if you're listening to this and you haven't started separation anxiety training, I've probably put you completely off. But please don't. It's not necessarily the most fun thing you can do, but it's definitely worth it. However, that doesn't mean to say you should make it into a huge chore.

Make it a job, make it your reson deter, the one thing that drives your day. Don't think you can just train and train and train and train and train and not start to have that take a toll on you. In particular, dogs are quite resilient when it comes to learning. Give them a break, give them a day off, 24 hours, enough time to sleep, and that little brain of theirs will click back into learning again, and they'll consolidate what they did learn.

But with us, there are way more emotions going on, there's way more baggage and what can happen. And I do see this way too often, and it kind of prompted me to do this podcast, actually, is people who are so committed and so driven, and I love them for that. I love people who are that committed to this training, but so committed that it does take over their life and the training starts to feel like a job.

And, well, for most of us, when something starts to feel like a chore or something we have to do at all costs, like a job that we hate doing but we have to go to because we have to pay the bills, that's when we start to feel resentful. That's when we start to put more pressure on ourselves as well, because we hate it so much.

We start saying things like, I can't keep doing this. I can't be doing this forever, because you're going back to number one. You're looking at the top of the mountain. Instead of just focusing on today, you're also going back to number two, where you're doing the math and you're like, okay, I really hate this training, but let me see, how long reasonably am I going to need to keep doing it? So you've broken well, they were not rules, but you've gone against my first two tips.

And you're now making it a job because you hate it. It's a chore. You've just got to the point now where it's just making you feel ugh, and that burnout is real. The burnout will make you feel like you hate doing this even more. The burnout will make you feel irritable about it. The burnout will make you feel tearful and overwhelmed and depressed and anxious and just so horribly taken over, consumed by it. That what life are you left with. All you've got going on with your dog is this training that you hate.

You didn't get a dog to come into your life to focus on this thing you hate doing with your dog, so don't make it a job.

Okay, but how do you not make it a job? Well, you can just take the pressure off by saying, I might have a goal of five times a week most weeks, but you know what? If I don't do that, I'm not going to do it. Instead of saying train five times a week, which is, I know it's probably my fault because I encourage people to do that. Instead of saying that, why not say, I'm just not feeling it this week? But you know what, I will try and train once, just once, and anything else is a bonus.

So when you're feeling like that, when you're feeling like it's taken over your life, you resent it, you hate it, you're feeling burnt out by it. Instead of saying, I'm going to keep training and I'm going to keep training like crazy, go the other way and say, okay, all pressure off this week. I'm just going to train once. And if it's once for five minutes, that's all I'm going to do. Your dog will be okay, your dog will keep learning and you'll start to feel better about it because instead of getting up on a Monday morning and thinking, where am I going to fit all this training in? I'm just resenting it. It's just taking its toll on me. You'll say, do you know what? I can definitely do five minutes on Wednesday. Yep, I've got that. And then anything else on top of that is a bonus.

Okay, my final tip is take a break. Yeah, I know, I know. I encourage you all to train and train and train because we know repetition counts. Because we know to change a fear association you have to have a lot of neutral associations, you have to do a lot of repetitions. But here I am saying take a break. Wow, okay, Julie's just said I don't have to do this training.

Well, yes and no. You want to do this training when you're feeling up for it, when you're feeling fresh, when you're feeling like you've got it. But if you're not feeling any of those, if the burnout is just so bad, then taking a break is the best thing you can do. That could be a weekend, it could be a week, it could be longer.

Wait a minute, won't my dog lose all that learning? Well, we don't really know. We do know that it's easy for a brain when it's learning to revert back to old learning. We do know that and we do know that keeping new learning going keeps it fresh and keeps it prominent. But we don't know exactly how much difference taking a week off or taking two weeks off will make to your dog's learning.

I mean that learning doesn't go away, by the way, doesn't get lost. It just gets shadowed by the old learning. When we don't repeat the new learning and it's not fully cemented yet, then definitely taking a break. There is a risk that the old learning comes back again.

However, there's a few things to unpack here. First of all, if you're just hating the training and it's making you miserable, then you do have to stop because I've noticed that when we put pressure on ourselves because we hate the training so much, we want to get through it, we just want to get to the end of it. That's when we start taking risks, we push too much or we go the other way. And we get way too conservative because we're so worried about losing any progress we've made that we get really stressed about any sign of anxiety that sometimes isn't even there because we cannot go back, we cannot go backwards.

So taking a break can mean you come back at that with a fresh perspective. And let's also unpack the fact that taking a break because it doesn't mean that learning is gone, it just means that learning might get overshadowed a little bit by the old learning. Well, I've seen time and time and time and time again with dogs with separation anxiety. Once they get back into the learning, it comes back.

Now, some dogs can take a break and it's like you've never taken a break. Some dogs, you take a break and yeah, it's like looks like he's completely forgotten. But the completely forgotten is just the old memory is being used more than the new memory.

So how do you come back from a break? You just take easy, easy steps and you'll be surprised how when you start refreshing the dogs, your dog's learning, you can start to see that come back. And honestly, the potential risk of you taking a break that your dog might look like he's forgotten even though he hasn't, compared to the potential risk of you continuing on when you're burnt out is a no brainer.

Take a break and you can take a break from training, but do what I call ad hoc absences. What does that mean? Well, it means you're a bit less formalized. If you're in my group, my separation anxiety heroes group, you're getting your app out every time you train. If you're not using my app from my separation anxiety heroes group, then you've probably got a worksheet or a notepad or something like that. You're focused.

Well, you can also do a minute absence to take the rubbish rubbish or the garbage out if you want. Right. That's still an absence. It's not formal training, but it's still an absence. And I do find that when we're burnt out with the training, the train five times a week train with a plan that I always encourage you to do. But when you feel burnt out by that, stopping that, but maybe just keeping going with some ad hoc absences can at least keep your dog in the game.

And what that does is it makes you worry a bit less about taking a break because I know some of you are just like, I can't take a break, I can't take a break. But like I say, when you feel so bad about the training that it's overwhelming you and taking over your life and you feel awful and miserable, then taking a break is what you need to do.

But what about if you are so done, like you're just so done, you're listening to this and thinking, yeah, Julie, even a break isn't going to cut it for me. I just need to walk away from this now. I'm hating it. I feel hopeless. It's not going to happen for me.

Well, first of all, just know that so many people who've now got their dog over separation anxiety have felt how you feel right now and that it's normal and that it's natural. But also know that it's okay to feel like that while still not entirely turning your back on separation anxiety training because you can definitely, definitely say, I'm done, but still come back to it.

I know that sounds kind of weird. What do I mean? That sounds totally contradictory. Well, it's what I observe, and I think I've been there as well with other things with my dog's issues, is that we sometimes just need to say, I am done, because we need that for our mental health.

I am done. I'm going to focus on something else. Me and my dog are going to do fun stuff together. She loves doing scent work, so I'm going to spend my time doing scent work with her rather than separation anxiety training. I am turning my back on this. We're going to just keep managing. We're already managing absences. I'm done, and that's okay.

And you walk away, but guess what can happen because you walked away, because you now feel like a weight has been lifted, you end up quite often having more energy to come back to it. So saying, I'm stopping now doesn't have to be forever, does it? Do you see what I mean?

So kind of a heavy podcast today, but, you know, I like to keep it real. You know that about me. If you're listening to my podcast, I don't like to make it all hearts and flowers and it's all positive, and it's all going to be amazing because we're going to have hard times, and I want to be here for you when you have those hard times.

So if you're feeling like you are just so over this and so burnt out, do have a listen. Go back over some of these tips and think, okay, which one of these can help me? How can I implement one of these to help me feel that bit better about this thing? Because the number one thing that's going to get your dog over separation anxiety is you having the energy and the heart for keeping going, and that's what I want for you.

All right, thank you so much for listening today. 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://julienasmith.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.