

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 095 Transcript – A Hard Truth_ Why Not Leaving Your Dog Is Ridiculously Tough But Absolutely Necessary

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-095/>

If you've been working to get your dog over separation anxiety or you've given any thought to it, chances are along the way somebody might have said to you, you know, you can't leave your dog alone if they have separation anxiety, if you're trying to get them over their separation anxiety. Now, I know that statement is one that can stir up a whirlwind of emotions. It makes people angry, it frustrates people, it leads to disbelief. And I totally get that you might think that anybody who says that to you, myself included, we're all just being unsympathetic and that we just don't get the realities of your life and how difficult that would be, but believe me, we absolutely do.

And whenever I say that, whenever I say the thing is you have to find a way not to leave your dog, I'm not saying it to make your life harder. It's quite the opposite. In fact, making your life harder is the last thing I want to do. I only say it because I want to help you and because I want you to get your dog over separation anxiety as quickly and effectively as possible.

That's why in this episode, I want to dive into why I say this crazy thing, why on earth I put you through all of this and make you think about not leaving your dog. And I want to explain why it makes such a difference and why it's not forever. So let's dive in.

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 can't tell you how many times people have reacted really badly when they realize, and maybe you've been through this realization as well, that what I'm saying to them is yes. So when you do the separation anxiety training, you get your dog gradually being used to being on its own, but at the same time, you have to work out how not to leave your dog. And I totally get it. It's a ridiculous thing to say. It absolutely is. I mean, who can possibly it seems anyway, we think to ourselves, who can possibly?

Who has a life that they can schedule and arrange around a dog and make sure that they don't leave their dog? And when you first realize, when somebody's first telling you this or you work it out for yourself that you can't leave your dog, it comes as a massive shock. And so no wonder we rail against it. And I do understand, if you're in my community and you spend time in my free

groups, you might think that we're a bunch of unsympathetic, uncaring people who just don't understand.

And in fact, this episode today was prompted by a thread in one of my groups where somebody had posted, well, is this group just not a safe space for anybody who is currently still living their dog? And I was really horrified by that because the last thing I want is for anybody to feel in any of my communities that they aren't in a safe space. But I understand why people might feel that way, because it's really challenging.

If you're not in a position or you feel like you're not in a position to stop leaving your dog, then hearing other people going on about that or getting other people diving into the comments and saying you need to stop leaving your dog, well, that feels threatening, and it feels like you're under attack. And it feels like people just aren't getting you. But even if some people are diving into the comments and saying that, and by the way, if that's happening in my free groups, then I'm always counseling and chatting with my moderators about the fact that nobody should be jumping on people like that. So if that happens to you in one of my free groups, you let me know.

But if that's happened to you, or if you just generally feel angry or frustrated because you've heard me say it, or you've read about me, you've read something that I said about not leaving your dog, or maybe you listened to a previous podcast episode, if that's you, then I don't blame you. I honestly don't. I'm not saying that you're wrong to feel angry or frustrated or upset at the prospect of not leaving your dog.

I think it's a perfectly valid way to feel. And I felt that way when I first found out that I couldn't leave Percy. I mean, I just remember thinking, well, nobody can do that. That's just ridiculous. I also remember thinking, well, hey, so if I can find a way not to leave him, if I can find a way and not leaving him doesn't just mean you have to be with your dog all the time. I mean, it means that somebody has to be with your dog all the time. So I remember thinking, well, if I can find a way for Percy to be with me or with somebody else, 24/7 then separation anxiety isn't a problem. It's only a problem of maybe organization or scheduling.

It's no different to parenting. It's no different to having a two-year-old child who you can't leave. You just have to think about when you want to go out and do stuff and you can't take your kid with you. You have to think about someone being with them. Right. But you get on and do it. Now, when you get a dog, you're not signing up for that kind of parenting. And I totally understand that.

I know that when you signed up, when you adopted your dog, when you rescued your dog, when you brought your puppy home. Nobody thinks I'm going to end up with a dog I can't leave. Nobody. I mean, that's not true. There are some amazing people. And if this is you, oh, my goodness, hats off to you. There are some people who do adopt dogs who can't be left. My heart is just so full of gratitude for those of you who do. But I wasn't one of those people. I did not for a minute. Twelve years ago, 13 years ago now, expect to have a dog I couldn't leave. And that's the reality of most

people. Now, most people having kids understand that part of the deal is you don't just walk out the door on a Friday night and leave your 18-month-old just toddling around the house. But with a dog, we expect to be able to do that. So no wonder it's such a shocker that when we discover our dogs have this pathological fear, pathological reaction to being left, that part of the deal of getting them over that fear is not no longer leaving them.

No wonder we have such an extreme response. So I've been where you are, and I remember a kind of a curve almost, I think it's called there is there is a concept, a concept called a change curve, and it reflects how we go through and how we respond to really difficult things that happen to us. And one of the first things that happen that happens when we get news that's as bad and life-changing as you can't leave your dog is we do feel anger and frustration. And then we start to feel depressed. We start to feel really flat. We start to feel hopeless. And then hopefully, if we're lucky and we're doing the right things and we're talking to the right people and we're getting the right support, then we start to see a glimmer of optimism creep in, but it's not immediate. So for a long time, we can stay in that state of anger, confusion, and depression, and you might still be there.

And a big part of that initial reaction is grief. That might sound really weird. I'm just talking about finding out that you can't leave your dog. And so why am I talking about grief? Well, grief is feeling sadness at the loss of something. You might never have been able to leave your dog, and so you're not losing something you had. You've never been able to walk out the door freely. So you've not gone from a situation where one day you could leave Pepe and the next day you couldn't. Although that definitely happens with some dogs.

So what you're grieving is the life with your dog that you could have had, the life with your dog that maybe you've had with other dogs in the past, the ones who didn't have separation anxiety. Maybe you're also grieving for the life that other people seem to have with their dogs and the life that you hoped to have with your dog and that grief and that anger and that frustration at having a life turned upside down by your dog is not incompatible with loving them to the nth degree. I mean, you can love your dog more than anything on this planet and still be sad about the situation you find yourself in. Those two thoughts are not incompatible. And feeling depressed about the fact that you're trapped or that you don't know how to get your dog over separation anxiety doesn't mean to say you love your dog any less. In fact, sometimes the more we love our dogs, the more we place their emotions central in our decisions. Sometimes the harder it gets. And by the way, I think we should be considering dogs' emotions.

And I get that, and I get how hard that makes things for us. If we didn't care about our dogs, this would all be a lot easier. It really would. But you're here, you're listening to this because you really care about your dog. So I don't say find a way not to leave your dog just to be difficult. I really am looking for a way to make your life easier as quickly as possible. But let me help you, I hope, understand why I say this to you and hopefully explaining to you why might just help it feel a little less frustrating. So first off, as a refresher, when we get dogs over separation anxiety, we're using a technique called gradual exposure.

Now, that technique is used for any fear. So separation anxiety is a fear of being left. But we use gradual exposure whenever we try to get any dog over any fear. And it comes from human phobia treatment. So it's the same approach we use for people who are frightened of heights or worried about going to the dentist. And I'll come on to my phobia of dentists in a second because I've got a story to tell you about that that directly relates to what we're talking about in this episode today. And gradual exposure is we actually do expose the subject, the dog or the human, to the thing that they're scared of. We don't allow them to avoid that thing.

We don't allow them to run away from that thing. We do expose them. But it's so non-scary and non-threatening. The intensity of whatever they're frightened of is turned right down. So if somebody's frightened of heights, we start them with maybe five feet off the ground or not even. We don't get them scaling the Eiffel Tower in the first session. And hand in hand with that, we have to change, reduce, and eliminate the amount of scary time that's going on. Because in your dog's brain or in a human brain with a phobia, you've got an old association.

So the person with a fear of heights thinks that ladders are petrifying, thinks that open stairwells are terrifying, so that's what they associate with anything to do with height. It's scary. It's petrifying, I can't do it. We're trying to create a new association in the person with a fear of height that says, oh, open stairwells, no problem. I can stand on the 10th floor, look right down, and I'm fine. So it's a brand new association. It's different from the old one.

And the challenge that we're faced with is that the old one doesn't go away. That old association of "I don't like climbing open stairs" remains there. But what we do when we work with gradual exposure treatment is we increase the weight of the new association. So the new association starts to take over. But because that old association has been there for a long time, it's very susceptible to kind of barging into the brain again and saying, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Forget the new association. That's ridiculous. You really are afraid of heights, I need to remind you."

And it's often triggered by a scary experience, right? So that person who has a fear of heights has maybe worked up to walking up an open stairwell and got to the first floor and can look down from, say, the second floor. But for whatever reason, they decide to march right up to the 6th floor and look down, and it's way too triggering for them. So that old association comes back in and says, "Yeah, I see. I told you. Open stairwells, heights, anything to do with scaling up, anything to do with going higher. That is scary. I was right all along." So we have to remove that scary stimulus.

And if you think about what happens with a human phobia, people with a phobia naturally avoid what they're scared of. In fact, dogs naturally avoid what they're scared of too. Dogs who are scared of vet visits will not walk themselves into the vet. They will not say to you one morning, not that they could say to us, but if they could talk, they wouldn't say, "Hey, do you know what I'd really like to do? I'd love to go to the vets today. Yeah, I know I'm petrified of the vets, but hey, let's

just do it." Right? Said no dog ever. And the same is true with humans. Humans avoid the things that scare them.

So the person with the fear of heights isn't scaling the Eiffel Tower. The person who doesn't like insects isn't walking into a room full of them. The person who hates flying will do everything they can to avoid flying. People with extreme phobias of flying never get on planes. So people with a fear of something naturally avoid it. And the problem with dogs is that we don't give them as much opportunity to avoid the things that scare them as a human would. Because humans have kind of unlimited discretion here to avoid their phobia for the most part, some people are forced to fly, maybe because of work. Some people who hate public speaking occasionally have to do public speaking.

But for the most part, people with phobias are opting out of exposure to that phobia. I mean, too much. Actually, one of the problems with phobias is that people get so good at avoiding and escaping that the fear gets more and more entrenched. That's why we always say with dogs that if you're not training for a while, it's always good to keep them slightly in the game with some really simple training exercises, separate anxiety training, because too much avoidance isn't helpful either. So humans are really good at avoiding the things that scare them. They do it naturally. But dogs don't get that choice. And that's why gradual exposure therapy for a patient with a fear of flying or the fear of heights goes hand in hand with them not exposing full-blown intensity of the thing that scares them because they're not exposing themselves to it.

And we need to step up and make the decisions for our dogs that a human would make. So if a human had a fear of being left alone, they'd do anything they could not to be left alone, right? If we had that fear of isolation, we would do anything we could not to. If we had a fear of going out, if we had agoraphobia, we would do anything we could not to. So we have to step up because dogs can't make that decision. We need to gradually expose them to being alone, the thing that they're scared of, while avoiding them having full-blown exposure because that's the way we're going to get them over this as quickly and as effectively as we can. And we need to have lots and lots and lots of positive associations. So going back to that concept of there's an old association in your dog's brain and there's a new one, to get the new one to be the one that the dog uses all the time, the new association, you need lots of repetition. So you need lots of repetition of the safe exposure to being alone.

You have to expose your dog over and over and over to safe alone time whilst at the same time stopping the scary exposure. And to a degree, we're also fighting history. There's a long history with lots of dogs of negative association with being left. I mean, lots of dogs with separation anxiety, often they develop it before we know or sometimes stuff happened to them before they came into our homes. And so there's a long history of a negative association of being left. And dogs, just like humans, have a tendency to negativity bias. And so now we've got not only this negative history that there's moral repetitions of there are more your dog has more experience of negative exposures. If your dog had separation anxiety, before you realized it.

And one negative experience doesn't equal one positive experience. I don't know what the there is no exact ratio, but I can tell you that you need more positive associations to outweigh the negative ones. And so if you think about it as a scale, we've got positive associations on one side, negative on the other. We're trying to add more and more positive associations are being left. But if we add any negative ones again, especially given the weight of negative associations, there's a big risk everything just topples over to the negative side again. Now, one thing that can happen when we expose dogs to a full blown exposure, a full intensity exposure of the thing that they're scared of, is a process called flooding. And flooding has been used in psychotherapy. It has been used on people.

And it's basically where a patient is exposed to the maximum, absolute, maximum fear inducing intensity of the thing that they're scared of. They come through it, they go out the other side, and in conjunction with a therapist, they discuss and they rationalize that despite how horrific that was, they survived. They're still here, and it was okay. And when, because it doesn't always, and it often backfires when flooding does work, it's the therapist's patient conversation that's helping understand why that exposure wasn't as threatening as somebody initially thought. However, lots of people, many people and many therapists will never use it, because it's a pretty horrid experience, and it's risky because it doesn't always work, far from it. And sometimes it can make things worse, and it has to be done with patient consent. And if you ask most people, most people with a fear of flying would not say to you, yep, I want to go on a flight, and I want to go through the most turbulent, turbulent hour that you could imagine. I want that plane to drop from the sky, and I want it to go nose up again and then drop and go.

Nobody, rarely, with a fear of flying is going to say that. So human patients have a choice about flooding, and even when they do opt to do it, it can make things worse, and it might not always work. And that's why most therapists these days tend to back off from using flooding. The problem with using flooding on a dog is they're not a consenting participant. We can't ask dogs if they want to be exposed to a full intensity of the thing that they're petrified with of. And even if we could ask them, there's still a really big chance that it wouldn't work. It's really not a consistent approach for helping dogs overcome anything. It's a massive welfare issue, and it's just not an approach we should ever, ever think about using.

Now, everything I've said so far, I am not saying it to make you feel guilty. So if you've got this far and you're feeling guilty, then I feel bad because my intention is never to make you feel guilty about anything that you're trying to do with your dogs and your dog's separation anxiety, you're dealing with enough guilt. I mean, if you have a dog with separation anxiety, you know that you get so much guilt tripping from others. And I know absolutely firsthand how much guilt there is and how much guilt accompanies having a dog with separation anxiety. So the last thing you need is more guilt. And that's why I say believe it, believe it. Not everything I'm saying in this episode is

because I want to make your life easier, not harder, because I want you to feel better, I don't want you to feel worse and I don't want you to feel guilty. So gradual exposure is not a quick solution.

So even though I want to make your life easier, I know that it won't be easy in the short run. So my goal is to get your dog over separation anxiety as efficiently and effectively as is possible for your dog. That's efficiency, making the progress, making training go as well as it possibly can for your dog. And one of the things, one of the big things that slows it down, slows progress down or even halts it, is a dog getting exposed to a full blown exposure of what they fear. Now, I talked about the dentist early on. Now, luckily for most dogs, they go completely under when they're having dental treatment these days, and you can see why. Now, if you're like me and you've got a phobia of a dentist, then general anesthetic probably seems quite appealing when it comes to dental treatment. But it's not an option. If you're extreme and off the charts and you just cannot go near a dental surgery, then it might be.

But nowadays there are things like oral sedation, so conscious sedation that mean that you're not as wiped out and you can have smaller procedures done comfortably and calmly. Now, a while back, many years ago, I started to have sedation, well, maybe not full blown sedation, but certainly some kind of anxiolytic help when I was going through dental treatment. And I found that by doing that, by going to a different dentist, by having more checkups, because checkups don't mean drilling, by having more hygienist visits, because I really like going to the hygienist.

Now, I was gradually getting better and better with going to the dentist and I had a really long run where I didn't need to have anything done until I had a mountain by accident and I managed to kill the root, kill the nerve in one of my teeth. So I had to have a root canal treatment done on the tooth. And I was petrified. I was absolutely petrified because it wasn't something that I'd worked up to. It was way more than despite everything I'd been doing to get more comfortable with being in the dentist, it was way more than I could tolerate. So it was an intensity that was more than I had become gradually exposed to. And I freaked. I completely freaked. I had a terrible time. Now, luckily, I found a dentist who took a slightly different approach. The dentist that I went to, where I freaked, I just stopped. We didn't do anything, I just said, we can't do it, but I had to get this done.

So I found a dentist who was well known for treating nervous patients and we got through it and in fact, she said to me, you'll feel like you're having a spa day. And it was a really positive experience. And then another long run of nothing happening until I had to have something else done that also went not great. I couldn't get numb. I was anxious. The more anxious I got, the more numb I got. And it just got worse and worse and worse. It turns out that even though I'm getting better and better, I still needed a little bit of sedation.

Taking some tablet half an hour before that kind of sedation, not knock me out, general anesthetic, and I didn't have that, so the intensity was too much. If you've ever dived into thinking about whether you should give your dogs medication for home alone anxiety, one of the things that

medication does is it changes the intensity of the scary thing, right, because it changes your dog, the intensity of your dog's response. So it turns out that I still wasn't ready to go completely without sedation, so I still needed a little bit, but I had a treatment without it and again, I absolutely freaked. And so then I didn't know what to do because now I am petrified. I feel like everything that I've gone through all over the years of getting better and better and better at being at the dentist was completely undone.

And that's an example of what happens when you are getting over a phobia, but you experience an intensity that's way too high, it just takes you back. That old association kicks in, the negativity bias is there and your little brain is going, yep, see, I told you. In my case, dentist is scary, dental treatment is bad. And it was so loud, so much louder than the calm voice that had been saying to me in the last few years, yeah, it's not so bad, is it? So I just wanted to share that example with you. And if you've got a phobia, you might have had something like that, where you have an experience that is so triggering that anything you were doing to gradually get over your fear seems lost.

Now, I'm going to give you some hope, because if you're thinking, yeah, but if my dog has one bad experience, is that it? I am now, as it were, back in the saddle. The good news is that very often that once the learning is there, so I still have this learning that actually being in the dental chair isn't so bad. It's just that I had a one bad experience again, and it kind of buried that new learning. But the new learning is coming back. I'm having more positive experiences again, and I'm getting back to where I was before I had that full blown exposure. So I don't want you to panic and go, oh no, is there one bad experience? And my dog's going to know? As I always say to people when they do, when their dog seems to regress, that new learning is always there.

But what we don't want is to keep having those overexposure moments because look what happens. Okay, back to dogs and enough of dentists. Can you see why I'm saying this now? I'm not saying it to be difficult. I'm not saying it because it's stupid. I'm saying it to help you. And if you want to rail about it, if you want to say it's stupid, if you want to throw something at the podcast, throw something at the podcast. Well, you know what I mean, then I totally understand. But once you've done that, once you've been angry with me or whoever, whoever's telling you, I do need you to dig deep, and I need you to see how you can do this.

There are lots of people who were in your situation. If you're in the I can't possibly do this situation right now. Just know that there are so many people who thought the same, too. I thought the same, too. I thought I could never find a way to manage absences. Lots of people say the same, but they do. They dig deep, and they do what they can. All we're asking, all I ever ask of you is just do what you can.

And that could mean next week, just find 1 hour. Just find somebody to have your dog for 1 hour next week, because that will be 1 hour less of exposure than your dog's currently getting. I know that some people go cold turkey on this and they'll say, right, okay, I get it. And they turn their lives upside down, and they miraculously find ways not to leave their dog. But for lots of other people,

it's more of a process. And if that's you and you're not a cold turkey kind, then it's okay to say, okay, next week I'll try for an hour, and then maybe the following week I'll see if I can find someone to have them for half a day. And then maybe it's a day. And if you can't afford daycare or a pet sitter or if you live somewhere where there aren't those options, then make sure that you're making the most of local Facebook groups of next door.

Make sure you're making the most of my free group where you can look for people in a similar situation to you. Trade time. If you know somebody who's got. Kids. Maybe you could babysit. Maybe they could DOX it in return, call in all those favors. It doesn't have to be one streamlined solution. In fact, for lots of people, it's often a real patchwork of such and such.

So and so will have them on Tuesday afternoon and then on Monday morning and so on, so it doesn't have to be Dog daycare five days a week. Often we're patching together a solution, and that's okay, too. So if you've made it to the end of this podcast episode without getting ridiculously angry with me, then I'm so grateful. I really am rooting for you and your dog. I just want this to go as well as it possibly can. And do know that it's okay to feel like this is ridiculous, but it's also okay just to dig in and see what you can do. So thanks for listening. I do know you've got lots of options when it comes to podcasts, so I appreciate you taking the time.

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. 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. Thank so much. Good luck with that training, and bye for now.