

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 096 Transcript – Is Separation Anxiety Training Actually Futile_ No. Here's Why

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-096/>

Now, yesterday I had one of my regular Zoom coaching calls with members of my separation anxiety heroes group, and one of the topics that came up was whether training, whether separation anxiety training was actually futile. Now, why did that come up in a group coaching call where we're talking all about how to make training work? Well, it was because we were discussing the fact and fully transparent about this, that while gradual exposure to alone time, which is the method that I use, it's a tried and trusted method. While it works for the vast majority of dogs, a really good number of dogs, there are some dogs who just don't respond to that type of training. In fact, they just don't respond at all and they end up never recovering from separation anxiety. Don't despair. You're listening to this and you're thinking, oh my goodness, that's my dog. Actually, that's one of the themes of yesterday, too. I think when we hear that, we always think, that's going to be my dog anyway.

So then somebody said, and I think very fairly well, what's the point if my dog is going to be one of those dogs that's not going to recover? Am I just wasting my time? Well, you won't be surprised to hear that I dived in with different thoughts on why it isn't futile and why I am really passionate that it is something that's worth doing. And I wanted to share those reasons with you and share those thoughts with you in this podcast. So tune in to find out why separation anxiety training isn't futile and my top three reasons to back that 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.

Now, whether you are deep into separation anxiety training or whether you're just standing on the edges kind of looking at what everybody else is doing and thinking, oh my goodness, I can't do that, that just seems overwhelming. It seems too challenging. Or maybe it just seems like really dull, because frankly, it's not the most exciting thing that you'll ever do with your dog. So whether you're feeling the weight of doing separation anxiety training, or maybe perhaps you haven't even started doing separation anxiety training because it just seems too much, then you might be thinking, is it even worth it? Should I even bother? And a quick refresh on how separation anxiety training works, we use a method that's based on the way that we treat phobias in human patients. We gradually expose the brain. In our case, we expose dogs to a gradual and increasing amount of

alone time. And then by facing their fear, or facing the thing that used to cause fear, the brain develops a different and better response. But you have to go slowly and you have to do it in short increments.

So the times that you expose your dog to can never be long and they can never be a stretch. They have to be only as long as your dog can cope with. And sometimes those times can be really short. So, yeah, you do a lot of training, and everybody who's ever got their dog over separation anxiety with gradual exposure has done a lot of training. It's not the only condition. If you do a lot of training, your dog will definitely get over separation anxiety. Oh, how I wish it was. But it's a necessary condition.

And hence the conversation we were having yesterday. What if I'm doing all this training? What if I'm going in and out of the door over and over and over? What if I'm going and sitting in my car for five minutes every night over and over? Because we're now at five minutes and I can get to the car, but I can't go any further? What if I'm doing this stuff and it's all pointless? What if my dog is one of those dogs who's never going to recover? Well, that's such a valid concern. Nobody wants to waste their time. Nobody wants to think that they're doing this thing. And there's always an opportunity cost. Whenever we decide to do something, we're saying yes to that thing and no to something else. So what if we're just completely wasting our time? Well, I don't think you are. But if you've ever found yourself having these thoughts, let's just go through three reasons why you're not, and why it's not a futile effort, but also why it's okay to think that.

Let's start with my first reason, and that's that we need to think about the risk versus the reward. I mean, like lots of things in life, there's no guarantee of success here. Lots of people do the lottery, which costs not only money, but time, because you have to buy your tickets. And for most people, the vast majority of people, they're not going to be successful. Most people end up out of pocket when they do the lottery. Maybe they'll get small wins here and there, but there's no guarantee of success. And that's like lots of things that we take part in. There's no guarantee that we'll be successful, but we do it anyway.

And sometimes we do things because we think they're worthwhile, or sometimes we do things because, like the lottery, we're addicted to the fact that there might be a good outcome. And separation anxiety training is not like that. It definitely falls into the dull but worthy category. There's no instant hits when you're doing separation anxiety training. But of course there is that risk. There is that risk that you do the training and your dog is one of those dogs that won't recover. But even though that risk reward seems quite stark, you do all the training and your dog doesn't recover. I would also argue that without the risk, there is no reward.

So you won't know if your dog will recover from separation anxiety unless you do the training. You won't know if your dog will recover from separation anxiety if you stop the training and never restart it. So there is a risk, but there is a potential reward. And the chances of your dog getting over separation anxiety are significantly higher than you winning the lottery. But also, even though the big reward that we want from doing separation anxiety training is we want to be able

to leave our dog for 2 hours or 3 hours or 4 hours or whatever is going to be life changing for us. But there's also other rewards along the way. You might have noticed that the more that you do Separation Anxiety training, the more your dog gets comfortable with you going out of the door, even if it's for short amounts of time. You might have noticed that your dog starts to follow you less around the house.

You might have noticed that they become more comfortable with other people. You might have got to the stage where you can't go out for 3 hours, but you can at least take the rubbish out, take the garbage out, you can at least pop to the store or the shop. So it might not be the three or four or Life changing amount that you're looking for, but you're still being rewarded. There are still benefits, there are still positive changes. So don't always think about this in terms of it's not working unless I'm at 4 hours. If you look harder, you're probably seeing changes and benefits that maybe you're overlooking because you're so focused on that big prize. So the risk reward is there, and if you never take the risk, you won't ever get the reward. All right.

Moving on to reason number two, and this is that you're either winning or you're learning. So the training isn't Futile because you're either winning or you're learning when you're doing the training. And as you journey through Separation ANxiety Training with your dog, every time you do an exercise, every time you look at your dog and really examine what they're doing, you become more and more of an expert in your dog. You'll learn to read their body language like a book. You'll spot things that you didn't used to spot. You'll recognize the tiniest, tiniest microbehaviors that give you a wealth of information about what's going on inside your dog's head and which is priceless. And that knowledge, that learning about what's going on with your dog is invaluable in different situations. So you're not just learning about your dog in the context of separation anxiety, but when you start to realize that, for example, this one's quite common, lots of people worry about their dogs licking lips, and it is important to look out for dogs licking their lips if they're doing it excessively, if they're doing it repeatedly, out of context, and especially if they do it over and over again during separation anxiety training, then it's something to start to be concerned about.

But it's also a natural behavior. And if you've never done this before, watch your dog when they yawn, because many dogs, I would say the majority of dogs, when they yawn, there's often a lip lick that kind of comes at the end of the yawn. It's almost as if it's all part of the yawning process. So look at your dog next when they're sleepy and they do a yawn and see if you can spot that lip lick. Why does that matter? Well, because yawns and lip licks. So not just lip licks, but also yawns are often seen as immediate signs for concern and alarm by people. Oh, my goodness, my dog yawned. So my dog must have been stressed.

Well, yes. I mean, it could be stress, could be a little bit of tension. It could also be, especially when you're doing separation anxiety training, that your dog is on the bed, on their bed or on your bed or on the sofa, and they're kind of like, oh, she's doing that really dull thing again. And it's boring. And when you get really good at doing separation anxiety training when it's advancing, your dog

does start to go, okay, I'm just going to go and have 40 winks. And so they're sleepier, which is brilliant because when they're sleepy, what they're going to do, they're going to yawn. I mean, we don't need dogs to be asleep when we're doing separation anxiety training. They don't even need to be on a bed.

They can be by the door, but you will see more and more as you go through the training that they become kind of drowsier. They do go into a much more kind of less active state. And so it's not surprising then that those dogs yawn. And if you've got a dog who, like most of dogs, when they do a big sleepy yawn, they do a lip lick at the end of it, then you now know that if there's a context where your dog is kind of looking a little bit sleepy during separation anxiety training, you now know that the yawn isn't a worry. And you also know that the lip lick isn't a worry because we've got perfectly in context behaviors. We've got a yawn because we've got a sleepier dog or a more kind of drowsier dog who's thinking about having 40 winks and they do a lip lick afterwards because that's normal for them. So outside of separation anxiety training, go and have a look at that one. That's just an aside, but there are many, many things that happen during separation anxiety training in terms of your dog's body language that are just like golden in terms of you learning about your dog.

So even if you've not had a fantastic week progressing with separation anxiety training, I bet you've learned something. I bet you've learned something about your dog or about the training. And that phrase, you're either winning or you're learning is one of my favorite quotes, and it's from Nelson Mandela. I feel like it should be the motto for everybody doing separation anxiety training because it is so true. So no, not futile, because you're learning. And a side note on these behaviors and what's normal for your dog and what's right in context, how do you assess that? Well, you go and have a look at your dog outside of training, too. So I was talking about the yawn. Have a look at your dog when they're sleepy.

So not in training, but when they're sleepy, when they're on their bed, when you know they're in a really sleepy state. And see if they yawn. See if they do a lip lick afterwards. And it's the same with any behavior that you're concerned about in training. Do you see it at other times, too? Because your dog's real baseline is what they do outside of the training. And then in training, you're comparing that behavior or any behavior you see to, is that normal for my dog? So you're either winning or you're learning, and you're especially learning about your dog's body language. Definitely not a futile endeavor at all. Okay.

And finally, my reason number three, the potential regret of not training. So, no, I don't think training is futile because not training could leave you with a sense of coulda, shoulda. What would it have been like had I done separation anxiety training? And I tell you, I work with lots of people who think about doing the training, and then maybe they don't get to it, or they were going to do it this week, but something happened, and then another thing happened, and a year later they still haven't done the training, but then they start the training and they start to see progress, and it's very motivating, and everybody thinks, oh, I wish I'd started sooner. So there's always a downside

to not doing something. So even if you're in that moment where you're thinking, oh, am I wasting my time doing separation anxiety training? How would you feel if you just didn't do it at all? Wouldn't you feel like things could be different? Wouldn't you feel like you might be making a change with your dog? And the way that our brains work, often we regret the chances we didn't take more than the ones we did. And even if we didn't succeed when we did that thing, when we took that chance, then we often feel regret. We feel a kind of a nagging doubt or a thought in our head that says, there's a little voice in our head saying, oh, what would it have been like if I'd started training six months ago or a year ago? Where could my dog be now? So we always tend to regret things that we haven't tried. That means that you don't want to let the fear of futility or the fear of failure prevent you from trying to get your dog over separation anxiety.

I know it's a lot of work, and I know that we all have a very, very limited amount of time. So if you're really, really worried about this becoming a futile exercise, and if I haven't convinced you with my three reasons today that it really is worthwhile, what if you didn't train as much? What if you pegged it back, what if you made the investment in training less than you currently invest in training? What if you reduce the number of days you trained? What if you reduce the amount of time that you trained for? At least that way, if you're worried that you're wasting your time, you're spending less time doing the training. Now, of course, we do need to do a lot of repetition to get dogs over their fear of being left. We have to change that association that being left is scary. And we do that by repeatedly sending a new message. It's okay. You handled it. We do that by going in and out of the door, but you can do less.

So if you're doing five times a week and you're really going for it and you're feeling just like it's too much, do less, do a little bit, and then that might make you feel like you're not wasting as much time. I still don't think you are wasting time. But if you're feeling like you're wasting time, maybe that will help. So next time you feel that way, next time you think this is pointless, it's futile, come back and listen to these three reasons. Because I promise you, if your dog does get over separation anxiety, it is the best feeling in the world. I mean, my boy has been recovered for some time now, and I still get a thrill. I can still feel joy when I come back through the door. And I realized he hardly even noticed that I'd gone.

And then when he wakes up and he's like over the moon and he can't wait to see me, that fills me with joy as well. But that coming back to a dog who really wasn't bothered that you left when you had a dog with separation anxiety and you can now come back to a dog who can be left, that never, ever gets old. And I want that for you so badly. Okay, that's it for today. Thank you so much for

joining me. I know you've got lots of options when it comes to podcasts, but I hope this has helped. Good luck with your training, and I'll catch you online soon. Bye for now.

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of the be right back separation Anxiety podcast.

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