

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 099 Transcript – Is There Actually a Cure for Separation Anxiety in Dogs

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-099/>

If you're struggling with a dog who's got separation anxiety, I'm sure you must have thought, can I cure this? Can I cure my dog of this condition? It's totally and perfectly reasonable to ask yourself, can I ever have a dog who's cured of his problem of being left alone? Well, in this episode of the be right Back podcast, want to dive into this? Let's talk about whether we can ever really cure dog separation anxiety. And if so, how might we do it? And what might that look like?

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.

Okay, before we start, let's do a quick reminder of what we mean by separation anxiety in dogs. Let's just check that we're all talking about the same thing. Well, separation anxiety, it's an extreme condition of a dog having a phobic, a fear based response to being left. So we're not talking about a dog that when it's on its own, it might look out the window and bark at the occasional passerby. We're not talking about a dog who gets bored and 2 hours into being left, finds a cushion, rips up the cushion, and has a bit of a game. We're talking about a dog who has an abnormal fear based response to being alone. And that's the key thing. The key thing is, it's not normal.

And normal is what's normal. And sometimes I recoil from even using that term because, hey, who here has got a dog who's normal? But the truth is that most dogs don't struggle with being alone. They don't love it. I mean, no dog is jumping up and down and desperate for us to leave. Sadly, even dogs who are abused tend to want their people to be around. But most of those dogs who are just accepting and tolerating being left are just getting on with it. They're really happy when we get back. They'd rather we hung around.

For the most part, dogs like company, but they're not afraid. They're not anxious, they are not going into a panic. And that's the key thing that defines dogs with separation anxiety. Now, we also get some dogs who aren't coping with alone time, but they're not panicking. Either, but they're really struggling to tolerate it. So think about, I guess there's three buckets. We've got the vast majority of dogs, and it's probably around 80% of dogs who thankfully for us, because we just get lucky and they are okay with us going. Then there's the really fearful ones, the one for whom it's a panic inducing situation.

And then in the middle we've got dogs who can't tolerate the alone time, but they're not panicking. And these dogs are typically frustrated. They wonder why they haven't been taken with you, and they're either getting extremely bored or they just can't control and contain their response to being alone. I sometimes call these dogs the Fomo dogs because they think that maybe something better is going on on the other side of the door and they've not been invited. And so they might act out the whole time that you're gone, but it's not driven by fear. These two buckets are separate from the dogs who just get on with being alone and seem to handle it fine. Both of these dogs have an intolerance to being left, and for both of them, we need to help them to increase their tolerance of being left. You can't always tell the difference either between the ones who are pathologically anxious and panicky and the ones who are frustrated, because often the presentation is very similar.

We might have barking, we might have destruction, we might have excessive movement around the home, looking out of windows, running backwards and forwards. Typically, dogs who are extremely panicky will show things, signs that are different. So the ferocity with which they will try and escape might be greater. These dogs are more likely to harm themselves than the frustrated dogs, but it still can be quite difficult to tell. Either way, we've got a problem. We've got dogs who don't like being left, and they are showing that through vocalizing, through destruction, and in some cases inappropriate elimination, basically peeing and pooping around the house when actually they're house trained. So if you've got a dog who's doing any of those and does it consistently and consistent, doesn't mean to say that it has to be every single time you go out. I think there's often some confusion here, and I'll hear this a lot from my clients in separation anxiety heroes or from people in my free online groups.

I'll hear people say, but it doesn't happen all the time. Sometimes I can go out and they're fine, or sometimes I go out and they only vocalize for half the time that I'm out. But consistent is different to every minute of every absence. Now, there are plenty of dogs with separation anxiety who will do their thing the whole time that you're gone. So if you've got a dog who barks when you've gone, there are some dogs who will bark the whole time. If you've got a dog who destroys, there are some dogs who will destroy the whole time. But there are dogs for whom this is an on and off pattern of behavior, but it's still consistent. It happens regularly.

It's not something that happened once and didn't happen again, or happened several times and hasn't happened again. Even if it comes and goes, it's consistent. So there is a problem there. Another thing I think that people get confused about is they will sometimes think that they'll hear people like me talk about the signs of separation anxiety, and I definitely talk about this a lot, and they'll say, oh, but my dog only barks, or my dog only chews, or my dog only howl, only defecates, but he doesn't howl. Your dog doesn't need to do all of these things for it to be a problem. And basically, if your dog is doing things to excess that we wouldn't expect from a typical dog, then you've got a dog with separation anxiety, or at the very least, a dog who can't tolerate being home alone. And so can you see, it doesn't have to be all the things, and it might not be any of the big things that we always talk about with a dog with separation anxiety. But if your dog is doing things

that present as a problem when you're gone, you've got a dog with a problem of tolerating alone time.

Okay, so those are the signs, those are the things to look out for. And listening to this podcast, you may have come to this podcast already knowing that there's stuff going on with your dog that isn't right. You just know that you may be well down that journey. You may have worked this out a long time ago, and now you're coming to this podcast thinking, yeah, Julie, but just tell me, how do I deal with that? So let's talk about that. Well, the good news is that we can give dogs the coping mechanism to handle alone time. We can help them be more comfortable with being left, whether they are just feeling massively like they've been left out, or it's panicking juicing that being separated from the rest of their family is just too much for them. And it sends them into anxiety spiral. So regardless of what's causing this intolerance to being left, we can help a dog feel better about being alone, and we do that in the same way.

So whether you're listening to this, thinking, oh, I think I've got, I've heard Julie talk about those FoMO dogs before, those fear of missing out dogs, and I think, that's my pup, so that's better, right? And I don't have to do stuff or I don't have to do as much. So if you're thinking that, or if you're listening and thinking, no, I've definitely got the panicky one, the approach is going to be the same. So that's good news because we don't have to make this complicated. What we're going to do is use a technique that helps your dog be more tolerant with alone time. Okay? So just keep thinking about that. Try not to worry too much about whether it's panic or partying or fear or fomo. I know I've talked about that in the past, but I now think it's much simpler to just reflect on have I got a dog who handles alone time or a dog who doesn't? Okay, so we're all here, I think, because we've got a dog who doesn't handle alone time. So what can we do? Well, we're going to use a technique called exposure therapy.

It sounds like a fancy term, and it comes from the world of human psychology that we apply. We take what we know about how human brains adapt and we apply it to dog's brains because dog and human brains are really quite similar. And so the techniques tend to work in a similar way. There are differences, but there's enough similarities. And in fact, we take exposure therapy a step further and we call it gradual exposure therapy. There are many different types of exposure therapy. You might have heard of a term called flooding. Flooding is a form of exposure therapy, and it's very different to gradual exposure.

I'll talk about gradual exposure first, and then I'll tell you a bit about flooding. Gradual exposure is where we take the thing that our dog is scared of. And for a human with a phobia, it would be whatever the human is scared of. But let's focus on dogs. So we take whatever our dog is scared of, and we do expose the dog to that fear, or at least to the thing it's scared of. And that's a subtle but really important difference because we want to expose our dog to the thing it's scared of. At a level of intensity that doesn't actually make the dog frightened. So it's like, yes, I know you're frightened of alone time, but what we're going to do is we're going to turn that right down, find a level where you can experience alone time so you're exposed to it, but it's not going to scare you.

There's going to be no fear. Massively, massively important. So it's exposure without the fear. All right, flooding. And it's really important, I think, to talk about flooding because especially today when I see tons of stuff going around the Internet about people like dog daddy, there are trainers in the UK who are all over the Internet doing abusive, punitive, Bullying, just horrid, horrid things to dogs and seemingly getting results. They don't believe everything you see in a 22nd video. However, some people would claim that these trainers are getting results. They are inverted commas.

In inverted commas, transforming dogs. Well, yeah, they may well be. They may well be transforming a dog into a dog who's now shut down, who is so scared, in fact, of the thing that it's been exposed to that it stops responding. And that is a term we call flooding. Now, flooding can actually produce a response where the patient, if we're talking about humans or the dog, when we're talking about dogs with fears, comes out of the other side of exposure and goes, oh, I survived. That wasn't so bad. And that helps the dog overcome the fear. But it's so problematic.

It is so problematic with human patients. It tends not to be often used as a treatment because it is a horrible, horrible experience. Imagine, think right now of something that you are scared of, the thing that you hate most in the world. Imagine being exposed to that at full intensity. So if there's a particular animal or insect that you're frightened of, flooding would put you in the same room as like hundreds of those and leave you there until eventually you go, oh, okay, right, so you go through a massive process of panic and then eventually maybe you'll come out the other side and go, oh, okay. So you can see why therapists don't like using it, because it's hellish for people. Not only is it hellish, but it often doesn't work and it can make things worse. So when therapists, the few that do use flooding, when therapists do use flooding, patient consent is everything.

It's essential. So people have to understand the risks. This could make it worse. They have to understand how unpleasant the process would be and they have to subscribe to that. They have to agree to that. So let's come back to our dogs and flooding exposure. Well, here's the thing. We can't ask dogs whether they're okay with this.

So we've got a process that's flawed, that potentially doesn't work, that could make things worse, and that is a horrific process for the subject to go through. So no flooding, forget it. Let's not do this to our dogs. All that said, when a dog does respond to a flooding process, that's great for a TikTok video, but miserable, miserable for that dog and for all the other dogs for whom these trainers attempt to treat with flooding. And it doesn't work. A classic example of flooding in separation anxiety training is the cry out method. And now I'm guessing that you wouldn't have got this far into this podcast without having at least been told about crying it out or even tried it yourself. Because everybody tells you now, crying it out is essentially a form of flooding.

It's you are just going to be left, you're going to get on with it, you're going to come out the other side and you're going to be okay. And that's also important to remember about when flooding is used with human patients. In the rare situations where it is used, it's done alongside a therapist

who talks the patient through the process. So how did that feel? And you came out the other side and it was all okay, wasn't it? Well, we can't do that with dogs. We can't have that cognitive debate with dogs. We can't aid them in that way, so they are left to it. So if you ever hear somebody say, oh, I let my dog cry out, my dog ended up being okay. Just remember that this is what they might have gone through.

So very, very different to the technique of gradual exposure that we use for training separations. It's so massive aside there, but I think it's so important because people are still recommending that we flood dogs. So we don't do that. We're going to choose an ethical, humane, kind method of gradually exposing our dogs to alone time. And what that does is it changes their response to alone times. Currently they are sensitized to alone time. That's just a fancy term for they really don't like it. What we want is to change that response from I really hate this situation to just neutral.

So their response to alone time becomes neutral. We're not going to get them to jump up and down every time we go out, so we're not expecting the response to change from negative to hugely positive. We just want the response to go from negative to neutral. So that's what we're trying to do. We're exposing them to the thing that they're not happy with and making them okay with it. Okay is what we aim for, and that's what gradual exposure looks like. And then the other thing that we make sure we do is that we aren't overloading the dog's brain with lots of other challenging and potentially aversive situations. So what do I mean, aversive? Aversive is anything that a dog finds unpleasant, scary, undesirable, doesn't want, and so on.

So that's what we mean by aversive. And when we're working to help a dog become okay with something it's not currently okay with, let's not forget that we need to keep their world safe. So we need to make sure that what's going on around them isn't overloading them, isn't triggering them. You might have heard of the term trigger stacking. One thing that we can do to help separation anxiety training, help gradual exposure training work better is make sure that the dog isn't exposed to lots of other trigger stacks at other times outside of being left. And then the final piece of this puzzle in terms of how we increase their tolerance of alone time is we have to stop them being exposed to being alone. So just as I was saying that we don't want anything externally triggering for them. We don't want to use aversive training or harsh training methods.

We don't want them to want to put them into lots of scary situations. We need to make sure that alone time is good as well. Alone time is okay. And that might mean that right now, if your dog can't be alone, then when you're doing gradual exposure separation anxiety training, you can't leave your dog. The only time you could leave your dog is for any amount of duration that they can handle without getting scared. And if that's something you're still coming to terms with, I just want you to know that you are not alone. If you think my mind is blown, why are people telling me that I can't leave my dog? That is just ridiculous. I just want you to know you're not alone in thinking it's ridiculous.

Every single one of us. And I remember that feeling all too well. Who's ever been told to not leave our dogs? In fact, I was never told not to leave my dog, Percy. But the more I dug into how recovery would work, the more I realized, okay, this is bonkers. But, yeah, we can't leave him. We can't leave him. I still remember that conversation with my husband. Yeah.

So, okay, what we're going to do is just going to have to turn our life upside down, turn everything on its head and stop leaving him. And it's hard, even though I knew it was the right thing to do. It's not just physically and financially hard. The burden. I don't need to tell you all of this, all of you know this, all of you know about this burden. But maybe if you're listening to this and you don't have a dog with separation anxiety, maybe you're listening because a friend does. The burden of having a dog who you constantly have to think about whenever you're making any single arrangement is draining. So if you are a friend or a family member who sees somebody going through this, the number one thing you could do for them today is just reach out and say, can I have your dog for an hour? Anyway? Okay, so you're listening to this probably because you've got a dog with separation anxiety.

So you know that burden, it is tough. And I would never, ever ask you to do that just cause, right. Because I've been through that and it's just an awful, awful place to be. So if you hear me going on about this particular thing of not leaving your dog, I don't just do it to be difficult. I do it because it's the best way to get your dog over this. And that's the best way to come out the other side of separation anxiety. All right, so let's talk about how you can help this go a bit faster. Well, first of all, you can definitely think about reaching out for professional advice.

So separation anxiety training, this gradual exposure involves taking a small amount of what your dog's scared of and doing training sessions that mean you go out for whatever time your dog can currently cope with, and you do that repeatedly and you gradually increase the time that your dog can do. So maybe right now your dog could only do 2 seconds with you being on the other side of the door, you go from 2 seconds and you gradually increase that time. As long as your dog is tolerating it, as long as your dog isn't panicking in response, you don't do that in one session, by the way. You repeat the session. So every training session will have a target duration, and that target duration will go up when your dog can tolerate it going up. And if you think your dog isn't handling it the next session, you'd make it easier. In fact, I've stopped saying easier because every session should be easy. Every training session should be easy.

You should either have a target duration that whatever target duration you're working towards, it should always be something the dog doesn't freak at. So it should always be easy. But you might have longer ones and you might have shorter ones. I've got a ton of information on this, by the way, in my book, so that's a really good place to start if you're thinking, oh, I actually do want to give this a go. Tons of training tips and exercises and tables that you can fill in, available in my book, the be right back book, same name as the podcast. So if you want to really get cracking with separation anxiety training, that's a great place to start. You can also though think about hiring

somebody because you might be listening to this thinking, gosh, that sounds quite complex. It sounds like there's quite a lot to it.

It's sort of one of those simple but complex things. So yes, there are lots of moving parts to separation anxiety training. So hire a professional. Look at getting one of my certified essay pro trainers. They know separation anxiety in and out, inside and outside. They really know their stuff. So working one to one is a great option. Now, that's not for everybody.

Not everybody has the budget for one to one. And that's why I mentioned the book, because the book is a really good and very, very affordable place to start. But you can also dive into my free communities. If free is what you're looking for, then starting with free by joining one of my Facebook groups where you'll get free advice. Another option is you can work as part of my membership, which is a monthly membership, and again, really affordable. But it is something that you probably need some guidance on. So even if it is just diving into my free group, even if it is just spending \$15.10 pounds on my book, you need a plan. Because when you do this training, you need to make it as easy as possible because there is a lot to it.

And getting the right tools and getting the right information is going to make it easier for you. Also, think about joining one of the free groups that I mentioned, not just to get advice, but to get community and to get support. Because I don't need to tell you this is a lonely, lonely journey and nobody wants to do difficult things on their own. Well, maybe we do, but you shouldn't because the research is really clear on this. When we do things that are really difficult we do them better and are more likely to stay the course when we do them with other people. So I highly, highly recommend that you jump into one of my free groups. And even if you just read the comments, you might feel like, oh my goodness, I am no longer alone. Chances are you don't have many people in your circle who have a dog with separation anxiety, so finding people that do is going to make you feel a whole lot better.

And then another thing that can help you. So I talked about you getting professional help. I've talked about you diving into an online community. But think about therapeutic assistance. And by that, I mean anxiety medication for dogs. It's something that maybe as recently as ten years ago we might all have freaked out at, but we're now seeing really good results when we combine this gradual exposure separation anxiety training with medication. So it's not one or the other, it's dog anxiety medication. Plus the separation anxiety training.

Those two combined can be really powerful. Anxiety medication doesn't work for every dog, but when it does work, it's so powerful when combined with the training. And I hear people say so often, my dog was so different, I was really glad I did it and I didn't lose my dog. I still had my wonderful dog and their amazing personality. So do think about it, because when it works with the training, it's golden. Though I did a bit of a teaser at the start of this episode. In fact, this episode is the title of this episode has the word cure in it. But I've left it until now to talk about whether we can actually cure separation anxiety.

So I hope you stayed to the end and didn't mind me dangling that little carrot. I haven't talked about curing separation anxiety at all throughout this podcast. So now you might be thinking, did I even tune into the right podcast? And that's deliberate. It's deliberate because I want us to stop thinking about curing separation anxiety. I know that's what we want, and I know that's a natural response. We think we can cure stuff, and curing sounds so final and so done, doesn't it? But when we're talking about brains, we're actually talking more about recovery and change than we are curing. And we definitely don't fix things. Back in the day, my podcast used to be the fixing separation Anxiety podcast, because when I first started out in this world, that's what other trainers would talk about.

They'd say, yeah, we can fix separation anxiety, fixing the unfixable. I'd hear people say, well, no, fixings, like fixing a car or maybe even fixing a broken leg. You don't fix emotional, brain related conditions. What you do is you change the way the brain responds. That leads to a recovery and an improvement. And really, that's what we're looking for. We're looking for an improvement in the dog's response to being alone. Ideally, I think most of us want that improvement to look like a dog who can at least handle three to 4 hours.

And for many of us, that's enough. For many of us, that's enough to give us normality back. And so I really hope that we can stop thinking, actually about curing and start thinking about recovery. And recovery, by the way, for lots of dogs can look like cured. It can look like the dog is completely over this thing, like it never happened. But the reason why I just wanted to stop using the word cured is because it is still a reaction that a dog could have. So when you've been scared of something, so same with human patients, that neural pathway, that response of I don't like that thing that scares me, is still there in the brain somewhere. Our job, when we're doing gradual exposure therapy, is to make that old association really dusty and really distant so that never gets used again, but it could come back.

And so I think when people are talking about curing their dog or I want to cure this condition, if stuff happens in the future, that brings that back. And a classic one can be if you move house. Often dogs don't take their newfound home alone confidence with them, and they take a little bit of time getting used to a new home. And so you might think, I thought my dog was cured of being home alone, of having home alone issues. And now they seem to be stressing out again. And the reason is that that old memory, that old association that was really dusty and wasn't getting used, just started to get used again. And that's why I think if we still keep talking about curing, we're not really understanding what's going on with our dogs, and we're not describing the process either. So maybe that sounds really negative.

Oh, wow, she's telling us that my dog can't be cured. Or maybe you're thinking, well, that just sounds like words, because it's just semantics. What I want you to know is that there is a really good chance that you can get a dog who you can leave. Right. And that's what matters. Does it matter that your dog's brain hasn't eradicated this response? I think it does matter because I think it helps you understand what happens if that response ever returns. But I think it also helps you

understand what's going on with the training. And I think it also helps us understand why we can't expect a spectre dog to be okay in every single situation for the rest of its life.

But I also don't want it to make you feel despondent. Because just because we can't, in inverted commas, cure this condition doesn't mean to say that we can't transform a dog's life and our life with this training. We can. We absolutely can. And when you have a dog who can be happy on their own for three or 4 hours, who's fast asleep the whole time you're out, or even is just pottering around the house, looking out the window and choosing another bed to lie on, when that happens, when you've got a dog like that, you don't care whether that dog, whether you're using the word cured or not, you've got your life back and you've got your dog non anxious at you being left. You've got a happier dog. So who cares whether that's actually cured? You've got what you wanted, you've got what you needed, and you've got a dog who's in a better place. So I hope this episode has been helpful.

I do want you to know that there is hope, that hope isn't enough, by the way, and that there is a strategy, and the strategy is gradual exposure. Do check out some of the resources I've mentioned and maybe I'll see you online soon in one of my communities. All right, thanks for listening. I'll catch you later. 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 julianismith.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.