

LEARNING TO BE ALONE!
***Three steps forward, two steps back,
one step ahead! May, 2010***

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Gratefully, I have had only one, major learning experience living with an adopted dog suffering from separation anxiety.

We adopted a newfie at 14-months (adolescent-double-edge-sword) and made a few mistakes. After several months, we thought it would be fine to leave Jon in the outdoor kennels with 3 other dogs. WRONG! When we got home it looked as if our homestead had been bombed.

We pulled into the driveway to find Jon, hanging out of the enclosed seasonal porch window, big paws lopping over the railing, screen dangling in the breeze, blood all over his face. Gary turned white, and my dramatic reaction was: “oh crap (worse), who did he kill?”

I love Murder She Wrote and CSI. Gary fantasizes about being Jason Bourne. We launched into our investigation as calmly as possible. First, don't touch anything. Proceed with caution. We might miss evidence or damage the crime scene. Get the yellow tape. We didn't have any weapons on us. We weren't on duty. My little Swiss Army Knife and a flashlight will have to do. Let's make sure no-one is seriously in need of first aid. There was blood everywhere, but only from cuts on Jon's feet from breaking the window and landing on grass. So much blood!

Upon further investigation, we learned how incredible an anxious, scared dog, weighing 130 lbs can be. Jon had somehow managed to open the outside kennel door, break

through the basement window, landing in the grooming tub, now filled with broken glass, and explore the house. What? No-one home? He figured he'd tear down the blinds to look outdoors just in case. After renovating the basement, he backtracked to the outdoors, back into the glass filled tub, through the little basement window to the back deck, where he greeted us!

Fortunately, our property is fenced. Our neighbors said they were about to call the police because they thought someone had broken into our home. They were right!

Even that few months was too soon to leave Jon. We had picked him up with another newfie (effectively boinked) from a dedicated Newf Rescue friend, Tom, who knew these two dogs needed help. He would drive by out of concern.

Blame aside, we all make mistakes happen. That's how we all learn. Sadly, this saga is too common. A mom with two small children, divorced, decided to get two Newfies because they are cute. Act II – she decides that given her financial dilemma, breeding might bring in some extra cash. She now has two adolescent Newfoundlands, one pregnant, neither trained and two small children.

Last ditch effort, thanks to a “brilliant--??” trainer was to prong collar both dogs and fast forward train them. Didn't work. Eventually, enough people complained that the Newf Rescue gently offered to take the dogs. She reneged—good for the dogs.

By the time we planned to pick up Jon, another owner, who landed in our driveway through a referral, was looking for Newfie. They had recently lost theirs to old age. It

was Karma. The four of us landed at Tom's home to meet Jon and Clara, taking them into our humble, but not so brilliant care. We began our learning experience with a 14-month old, untrained, very strong dog. I do not recommend this for the slight hearted. 20-years ago I was gung-ho, but clueless as to my ability, which is probably why it worked out in Jon's favor. That's right, his FAVOR. We didn't analyze Jon. We did what a lot of people do. We loved him from the moment he landed in our family. We took on a challenge that turned into a 9 ½ year adventure!

It takes commitment and assertiveness, colored with understanding, determination, love and a tremendous amount of patience. Medication, like an SSRI, may help a dog with SA. Oftentimes, the owner ends up needing it,

Piecing together what history we could gather, and realizing that stories can get be skewed by perspective, ego, embarrassment, fear and sheer dumbness, we decided to view Jon as if he were a 130 pound puppy. This was working in every way, plus he was getting role modeling from our other dogs. The missing link was that we hadn't realized or been informed of how traumatic this transition was on Jon. Like people, dogs handle stress differently.

At 14 ½ months, Jon was about 17 years old in human years (behaviorally). He was a teenager without skilled parenting or boundaries. We expected too much, too soon. We took responsibility, without blaming or guilt. Okay, maybe a little, but we let that go. It wasn't going to fix the house, kennels or screens. It might mend our wounded eager egos, but it didn't help Jon. We left him for too long, too soon,

even after a few months. He wasn't ready. Our plan should have factored in a check-in within a half hour—then an hour, etc.

In Jon's case, we had taken three steps forward and 5 steps back—, so let it go and began again.

We followed our own advice, taking it much slower with shorter outings.

We made it through without meds, using gut instinct and support! Never hesitating to seek help and training, unfortunately it was offered in the approach that Jon already had—abusive with punishment and forced obedience. He had prong collar marks on his neck from repeated hangings, so that was NEVER going to happen to him again, no matter what. The approach that worked with Jon and future dogs was a combination of training and wellness, no force, assertive requests, and reinforcing small successes to create a confident Jon. We look for his strengths and focused on that.

Jon lived to be almost 10. After intensive therapy (haha) and wellness training, Jon learned to trust his new environment and us. He found a comfortable place in our pack, knowing that when we leave, he'll be fine.

He was always a live, independent spirit. He took off on us on Mt Chocura to chase a moose even though we "knew" he would come when called off-leash! He never again had to be anxious—because when we finally coaxed him back, he was greeted with a smile, and back on leash. Who knew? He didn't have to burst into a flight response, which is what happens to dogs

and people when anxious and/or expect the worst.

I always thought Jon would go into interior decorating. He ended up becoming a favorite of [Bruce Weber](#), landing gigs with Polo, Timberland and American Express commercials. He is in Bruce's "Gentle Giants". He swam across a lake and shaked for the cameras at Mt. Kearsage airing in a Super Bowl commercial.

He was a therapy dog who loved the job. He helped train many puppies at the [training sanctuary](#). He reminded me every day that once upon a time he dragged me down the road because I refused to give-in or give-up. Now, he was content to walk by my side. He was my teacher and I miss him!

SA is a complex behavior that keeps showing up in shelters, Veterinarians and behaviorist's offices. What's sad is that it is oftentimes misunderstood. With even a little canine education and planning on the human side, this can easily be prevented and managed, especially with adopted dogs who connect to our heart, but join our homes emotionally tattered.

SA can be rooted in a dog's being, AND it can be created by unknowing owners. Rooting from a dog's natural survival instinct to stay in close proximity to the pack, a dog that is left alone is more likely to die, either from starvation or a predator. Dogs are crepuscular (more active at dawn and dusk). Although we engaged daily with Jon, offering a healthy living routine, he wasn't confident enough to sense that good-bye doesn't mean forever.

Dogs living in domestic homes easily adjust to our [circadian rhythms](#) and daily lifestyle.

It may be awkward and scary at first for a puppy who has been with her canine mom and littermates, but most dogs are resilient, quickly learning their new routine if it is taught calmly, sensibly and consistently!

RECIPE FOR FAILURE!

Spending time with a puppy or adopted dog is a great way to bond. It helps make a smooth transition, as does a good training program. Be mindful that the time you spend should not overshadow the time you will "be able" to spend in a few months. You are setting the dog up for a crude awakening if you over indulge them upon arrival at their new home, and then leave them for long periods.

Adopted dogs seem to have a higher than average rate of SA. We don't know whether this is because dogs with SA are more likely to be recycled through shelters or because the stress of shelter life, networking, and fostering triggers SA. It is more likely a combination of these.

Dogs who are clingy or velcroed to your side in the get-acquainted time at breeder homes, pet stores, foster care or shelters are not always the prime choice, unless you are experienced. This kind of seemingly "instant bond" may be appealing, but visit two or three times before making a decision to take an overly shy puppy. Conversely, if you have never had a dog before, going gaga for the exuberant, adorable one, who can't calm down after 10-minutes of back flipping, may be a challenge you'll need more help with than a few episodes of [The Dog Whisperer](#).

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS!

The good news is we can condition our puppies and dogs to enjoy being alone!

Investing in an ounce of prevention can avoid triggering Separation Anxiety.

There are three primary ingredients in a successful new dog/puppy SA Prevention Program.

1. Resist the impulse to reassure the new pup/dog every time s/he cries.
2. Build trust and teach that being alone can be fun and relaxing, and
3. Saying good bye doesn't mean forever, so please save the emotion for the Oscars!

THE COMPLETE RECIPE!

1. Arrange to bring your dog home when someone will be able to spend a few days with him to relieve transitional stress.
2. Have a quiet space (crate or confinement area) prepared. This can be placed within sight (family room / bedroom).
3. When you arrive home, give your dog a chance to relieve himself outdoors. Spend 10-15 minutes with him, under close supervision, in the house. Then put him in his crate to learn how to relax.
4. Stay close to your dog at first, then gradually step away for a while, then return. You begin to teach your dog that she doesn't have to be with you every minute. Good things happen when you are away too, especially when you toss in a Kong filled with delicious kibble and perhaps a small bowl of ice, especially if it is hot.
5. Be aware of the behaviors you reinforce. If the puppy whines, don't go

running until she calms down. As long as your dog stays calm, gradually increase the distance and time you stay away. It's good to praise the calm, "Yes, good relax".

6. Puppies need to eliminate every hour – 90 minutes, so take him outside, play a bit, then back in to explore the house for awhile, then back to the crate. Get the picture? Small incrementally, increasing times of a little more freedom without mistakes.
7. Begin again! This doesn't happen in a day. The ritual with your puppy needs to continue, as you increase your time away. Leave a few indestructible chew toys and that indispensable [Kong](#) or [Dog Pyramid](#). Teach your dog that fussing takes you away and calm brings you closer. Turn your back, stand, breathe and wait, then snapshot a moment of silence with a smile & treat.
8. Begin taking short trips outside of the house so the dog learns to be comfortable while you are away (15 minutes, 30, an hour). Sometimes, take the pup with you, sometimes, don't! Life isn't always what it seems or what we want, and this is true for our dogs. We want them with us a lot when are good—but let's face it—life goes on. We have to out without our dogs. They can learn to be confident in being alone.
9. Car trip add-on: Continue going through the warm-up steps of leaving the dog home. Add on car trips and not only when it is to the Vet or Training Boot Camp. Take car trips around the block for 10 minutes, to the Vets on a non-wellness check day to say quick, 2-

minute “hi”, and then stop for a little walk in the park with a darn good SNIFF. Sniffing is a reward for most dogs; with olfactory’s 75 times greater than ours. They sniff in techni-color. Reenter home without drama.

1. Company’s arrived for Sunday Dinner. After introductions and a brief play session where everyone asks the puppy / dog to sit, take her outside to eliminate, stuff the Kong and back to crate! These are mini-anti-anxiety remedies.
2. Graduate School means being wise enough to know that some things work and others things simply don’t! Your dog will quickly learn to tolerate your absences for several hours.

Puppies can only be expected to hold their bladders for 90 minutes. They do not like to soil their dens. Force training a puppy for longer periods in a crate, and then punishing them, isn’t fair. If teaching cannot happen in the moment, then you need to let it go. Teaching happens when a dog and human are centered enough to learn.

For transitioning dogs, there are many options. I wish we had known about them for Jon years ago. All adopted dogs after him were asked to thank him for teaching us!

Options include a professional behavioral help, pet-sitter, dog walker or doggie daycare. I do not recommend doggy daycare for any adopted dog that hasn’t had an acclimation time within a family of at least a few months. Even then, you must visit the day care and interview them. Do

they have experience with energetic dogs, adopted dogs, dogs with anxiety issues? Do they even know what Separation Anxiety is? Videoing dogs playing is entertaining to watch, but only if the people watching have the experience to observe the body language and behaviors of the dogs. They need to honest in relaying to owners recommendations that makes sense for the dog, not trying to keep revenue (\$\$) flowing in at the expense of the dog.

Older adults love to offer their time walking pups. Post a notice in your church or community bulletin board.

Enjoy the Journey!
Maureen and the Pack
In memory of Jon-Luc