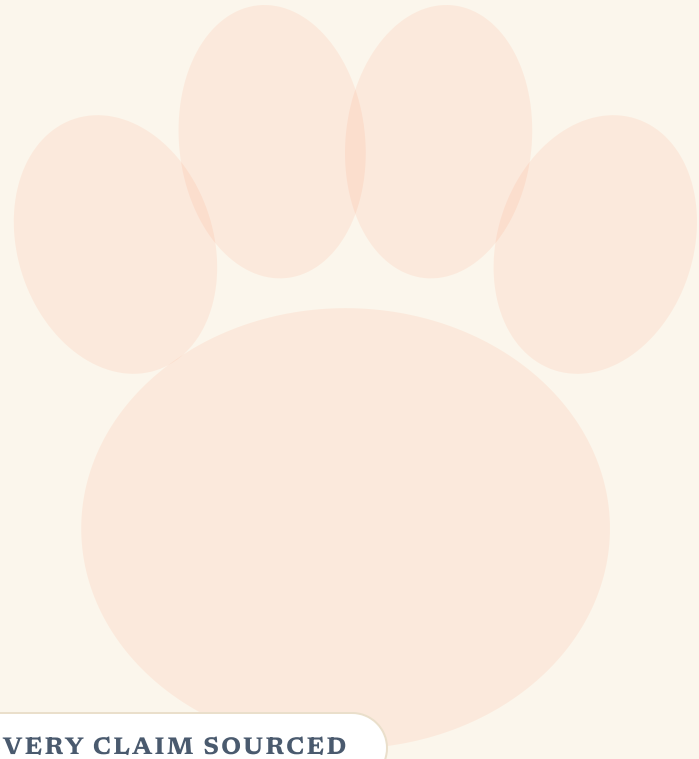
ReliefPaws

THE FREE GUIDE

The First Nights.

What's normal, what isn't, and the things nobody tells you about the first few weeks with a rescue.



THE OFF-DUTY TEST | 10 PAGES | EVERY CLAIM SOURCED

Ten pages. No filler.

You can stop after page three and still get what you came for. The rest is for the nights you want the whole picture.

01 **Hey, real quick** — What this is, and what it isn't

02 **The first six months** — What is normal early, and what the research says actually changes

03 **The Off-Duty Test** — Ten signs, three clusters, one score

04 **What each one means** — The night shift and the post

05 **The alarm he can't turn off** — Plus the tell almost everyone misses

06 **You're on a shift too** — The part nobody writes about you

07 **The BS Decoder** — Four things you'll get told that aren't true

08 **If you only do one thing** — Start at the bottom, not the top

09 **The plan** — Four things, and why it stops at four

10 **The Receipts** — Every study, so you can check me

How to use this

Read page three tonight and count. If you land on three or more, page nine is the plan, and page six is the one nobody writes, because it isn't about your dog at all.

Before you read anything else.

Two minutes of honesty, then we'll get into it.

This is not a cure for anything.

There is no supplement, no trick and no ten-minute routine that fixes an anxious dog. Anyone telling you otherwise is selling something. What's in here is a way to see what your dog is actually doing, and a handful of changes that have the best track record of helping.

Most advice for a struggling dog owner is written like you're doing something wrong. Train harder. Be firmer. Tire him out more. You've probably tried all of it, and you're probably tired.

So here's the thing this guide is built on, and it's the part almost nobody says out loud. **Your dog isn't broken and neither are you.** He's got a nervous system that hasn't been given a reason to stand down, and you've been carrying that with him, alone, for longer than anyone's acknowledged.

Both of those are fixable. Not overnight, and not with a jar of something. But they're fixable.

If he only just came home, start here.

You've never met this dog before. So when he paces at midnight, or won't eat, or hides behind the couch for two days, you've no idea whether something's wrong or that's just him. Nobody can tell you either, because nobody knew him before you did. Page three gives you ten things to watch and a number at the end, so you're working off what you saw instead of a feeling. And if he came from somewhere rough, you may never find out what happened. You don't need to. Every page works off what he's doing now.

WRITTEN BY

A dog owner, not a vet. I looked after a dog I loved who was struggling, and nobody warned me what that does to a person. Everything in here is either something I wish I'd known, or a study I went and read afterwards. Page ten has all of them, so you can check me. I'm building something for this too, and it's at the end, not here.

One more thing. If something in here sounds like your dog and it worries you, take it to a vet. Pain looks exactly like anxiety from the outside, and that's a difference a PDF can't tell you.

Almost None Of This Will Look Reassuring.

The first weeks are strange for both of you. Here is what is normal, what is not, and the one thing almost nobody warns you about.

Normal, even though it won't feel like it

He might not eat for a day or two. He might sleep sixteen hours. He might hide behind the couch, under a table, or in the one room you'd rather he didn't. He might pace at night. He might have accidents even though the shelter said he was house trained. His stress hormones are genuinely elevated when he arrives, and they take about a week to start coming down. None of this means you picked wrong.

WHAT TO SKIP IN THE FIRST WEEK

No visitors, including the ones desperate to meet him. No dog park. No bath unless he is genuinely filthy. No long days out. You are not being unwelcoming. You are keeping his world small enough that he can learn it.

He gets harder before he gets easier. That part is documented.

Researchers followed 99 adopted shelter dogs and asked the new owners the same questions at 7, 30, 90 and 180 days.

Several things measurably got worse. Excitability went up. Training got harder. He got more sensitive to being handled. Wariness around strangers rose at every single check-in.

That is not you failing him. That is a dog who has stopped being careful around you.

Two things got better, and they are the two this guide is about: by six months, separation behaviour had dropped, and so had the frantic, can't-be-alone attachment.

And the number worth holding onto: at six months, with every one of those problems measured and counted, **93.7% of those owners still rated their dog's behaviour as excellent or good**. Three quarters said it had improved. He gets more real and more difficult at the same time, and almost nobody regrets it.

Your dog gave himself a job.

Nobody assigned it. He took it on the day he decided you were worth guarding, and a lot of dogs never fully clock out of it. These are the ten signs he's still on shift.

CLUSTER ONE

The night shift

What he does once the house goes quiet and he still can't stand down.

CLUSTER TWO

The post

What he does about you, specifically, all day long.

CLUSTER THREE

The alarm

The system he can't switch off, even when nothing's happening.

1	He licks or chews his paws, mostly in the evening.	NIGHT SHIFT
2	He circles and re-settles before he can lie down.	NIGHT SHIFT
3	He paces in the hour before bed.	NIGHT SHIFT
4	He watches you sleep instead of sleeping.	NIGHT SHIFT
5	He follows you from room to room, every time.	THE POST
6	He waits at the door long after you've gone.	THE POST
7	He won't eat, or barely eats, when you're not home.	THE POST
8	He lifts his head at sounds you can't hear.	THE ALARM
9	He can't switch off, even when nothing's happening.	THE ALARM
10	You never hear him sigh and go heavy.	THE ALARM

0 – 2

Normal. He notices things. Still read page five, for the tell most people miss.

3 – 5

He's working more than he's resting. Page nine is your plan.

6 +

He's effectively never off duty. Worth a vet conversation too.

He's not being difficult.

Every one of these is a dog telling you something with the only vocabulary he's got.

1 · Licking his paws at night. Not grooming. **Self-soothing.** Tension surfaces the moment the house goes quiet. Rule out allergies and pain with a vet first.

2 · Circling before lying down. Not fussiness. **He's checking the room before he gives up his eyes.** One motion means he feels safe. Four attempts means he's still sweeping.

3 · Pacing before bed. Not restlessness. **He's waiting for the house to finish.** Until the last person is down, the day isn't over.

4 · Watching you sleep. Not strange. **It's the safest place to point his attention.** Every night for hours means he hasn't learned yet that the night is boring.

DO THIS FIRST · THE NIGHT SHIFT

Pick a fixed lights-out time and hold it for two weeks. Same hour, lights down, voices down, nothing rowdy after it. You're not calming him down. You're giving him a signal that the shift has ended, and that signal only works if it's the same every night.

5 · Following you room to room. Not clinginess. **You're not a person in a house. You're the whole territory.** Normal in a bonded dog. Worth working on if he can't handle a closed door.

6 · Waiting at the door. Not confusion. **He has no word for "later." Only gone.** The first half hour after you leave is the hardest part of his day.

7 · Not eating while you're out. Not pickiness. **Eating means feeling safe enough to stop scanning.** Skipping food alone then inhaling it when you're back means he never came off alert.

DO THIS FIRST · THE POST

Stop making arrivals and departures an event. No long goodbyes, no big hellos. Walk in, put your keys down, ignore him for a full minute, then say hello calmly. You're teaching him the door is boring, and boring is the only thing that makes the door stop mattering.

These three look like nothing.

Which is exactly why almost everyone misses them.

8 · Lifting his head at nothing. Not nothing. **He's hearing the house.** Pipes, a car four doors down, the fridge cycling. A settled dog filters those out. Checking every one is exhausting in a way that doesn't look like exhaustion.

9 · Can't switch off. Not energy. **Rest is a skill, and stress takes it away.** A dog running high hasn't got a broken off-switch. He's got a body that hasn't been given the conditions to use it.

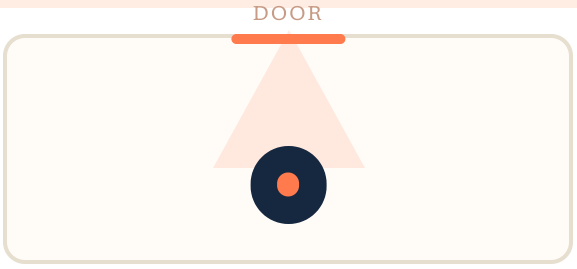
10 · You never hear the sigh. That big heavy exhale when he finally drops. **It's the sound of him clocking out.** If it never happens, that's the tell.

DO THIS FIRST · THE ALARM

Give him one spot that's genuinely his. Out of the walkway, with a view of the room, that nobody moves him from and nobody reaches into. Not a crate he gets shut in. A place he picks because it works. A dog can't stand down until there's somewhere it's safe to stand down.

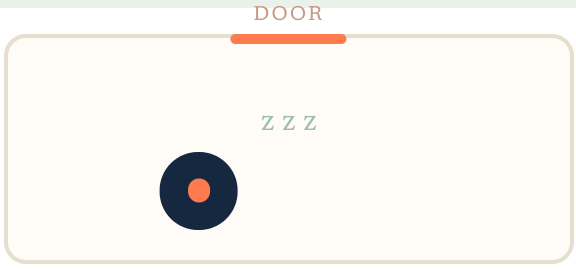
Here's the tell most people miss entirely. Watch which way he faces when he sleeps.

STILL ON SHIFT



Facing the exits. He lies where he can see the way in. Body pointed at the door, eyes on the gap. Resting, not off duty.

OFF DUTY

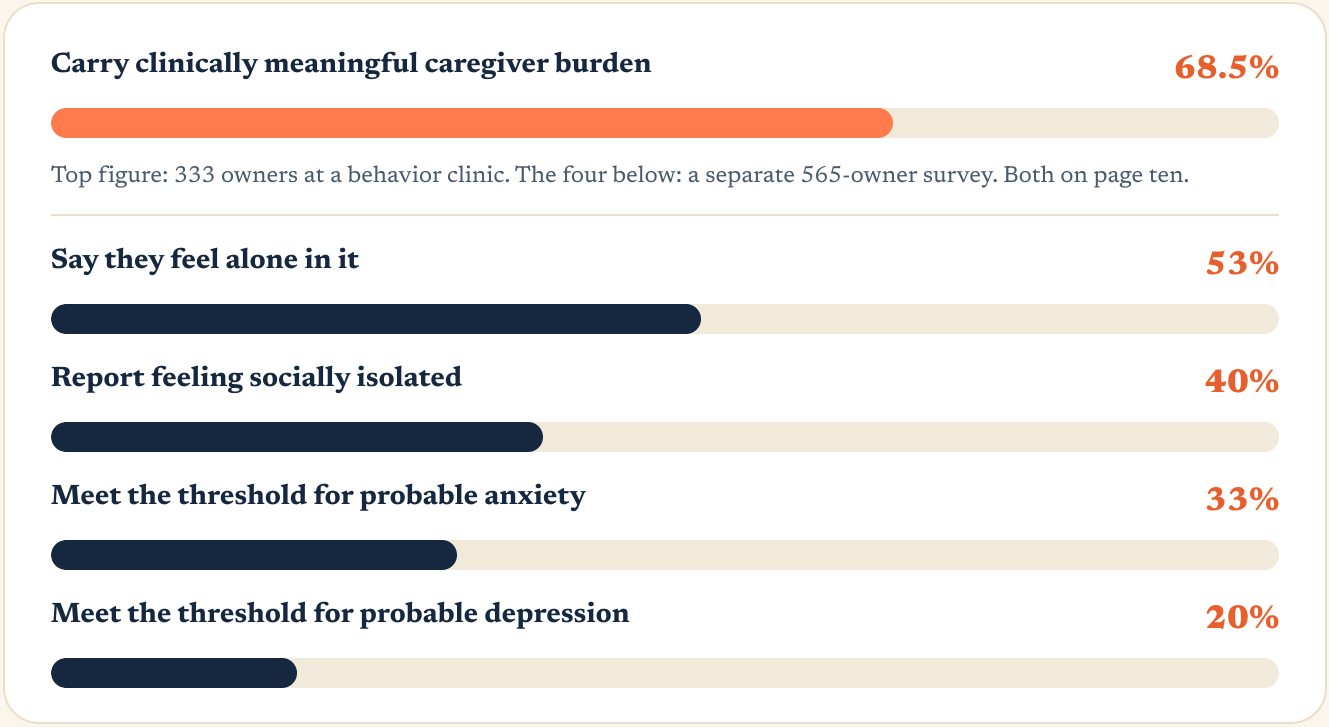


Back to the room. No view of the door, belly loose, nothing covered. He's handed the shift to somebody else.

That somebody is you. He isn't ignoring the danger. He's decided you've got it.

You're on a shift too.

Every guide about an anxious dog is written about the dog. Here's what almost never gets said: this is happening to you as well, and somebody measured it.



That first figure was measured with the same questionnaire used for people caring for a relative with dementia. More than one in four scored in the severe range.

> **It wasn't the dog's behavior that predicted the owner's anxiety and depression. It was the guilt.**

In a separate study of 565 owners, guilt tracked with anxiety, depression, burden and lower life satisfaction, on every measure. How severe the dog's behavior actually was did not. The distress is driven less by the behavior than by how the owner reads it. **The thing wearing you down isn't your dog. It's what you've decided your dog says about you.**

And there's a mechanism, which is why this isn't a soft aside in a dog guide. In 2019 researchers measured long-term stress in 58 dogs and their owners through hair cortisol. The levels were synchronized, and the direction ran person to dog. **The calmest thing in his environment is a calmer you.** On this one, your nervous system is part of his treatment.

Four things you'll get told that aren't true.

Most advice aimed at a struggling dog owner is decades out of date. These four come up constantly, and every one of them makes things worse.

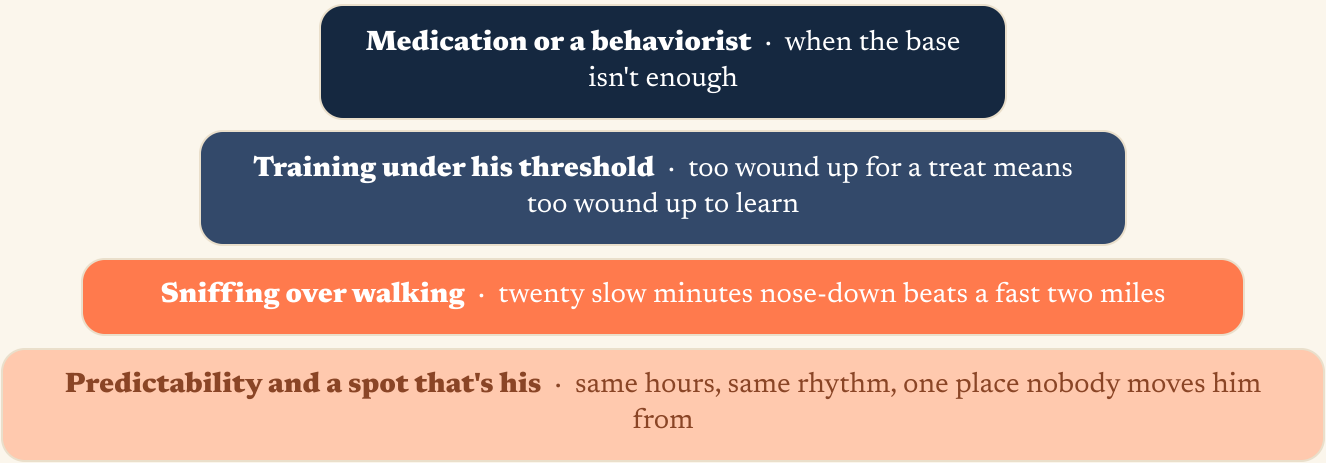
WHAT YOU'LL HEAR	WHAT'S ACTUALLY TRUE
"You need to show him who's alpha. Roll him onto his back."	**The alpha wolf was a mistake.** The researcher whose study created the idea spent years publicly trying to retract it. Those wolves were unrelated captives, not a family. Rolling a frightened dog just teaches him you're one more thing to brace against.
"Look at his face, he knows exactly what he did."	**He's reacting to you, not the mess.** When researchers tested the guilty look, it appeared based on whether the owner was scolding, not on whether the dog had done anything. Dogs who got the look had often done nothing.
"Just tire him out. A tired dog is a good dog."	**Exhaustion is not calm.** You can run a stressed dog into the ground and leave him more wound up than he started, because hard exercise raises arousal. Calm comes from predictability and teaching rest.
"Three days, three weeks, three months, and he'll be settled."	**Those numbers came from nowhere.** The 3-3-3 rule is rescue-sector convention, not a study. Surveyed in 2025, only about 30% of adopters felt their dog had settled by three months. Over 70% said four months or longer, and almost one in five said their dog still hadn't settled.

WHY THIS PAGE EXISTS

All four hand you the same thing: the idea that a struggling dog is a verdict on you. That's the guilt the research says is doing the real damage. You can be doing everything right and still have a dog who struggles.

Start at the bottom.

Everything above the base only works once the base is there. Most people start at the top and wonder why nothing holds.



Give it real time. Weeks to months, not days. Fewer new people, fewer new places, fewer big outings than you think he needs. You're letting his baseline drop far enough that he can finally clock out.

And go easy on yourself while it happens. You're the other half of this. A dog reads the room he lives in, and you are most of that room.

When to stop reading and call someone

Sudden behavior changes, licking a spot raw, real aggression, not eating for over a day, or panic that injures him. Pain looks exactly like anxiety from the outside. A vet or a veterinary behaviorist can tell the difference, and asking early isn't an admission of anything.

AND THE THOUGHT YOU HAVEN'T SAID OUT LOUD

If you've ever wondered whether you should have taken him on, you are not a bad person and you are not unusual. The 565-owner study on page six asked about it directly, because enough people get there that researchers measure it. It tracked with the guilt, not with how badly the dog was doing. The thought is a measure of what you've been carrying alone. It isn't a verdict, and it isn't a decision.

Four things. That's the whole plan.

Not five. That number is deliberate, and there's a study behind it.

01	**One lights-out hour**	Same time nightly, lights down, voices down
02	**Boring doors**	No big goodbye, no big hello, ignore him a minute
03	**One spot that's his**	Out of the walkway, nobody moves him from it
04	**Twenty minutes nose-down**	Swap one walk for a slow sniff instead

Why the list stops at four

In a study of 52 dogs with separation problems, the ones whose owners went home with more than five instructions did significantly worse than the ones given fewer. Not because the extra advice was wrong. Because nobody runs eleven changes at once, so none of them get run properly. Four is what a real week holds.

GIVE IT FOURTEEN DAYS

Not three. Fourteen is also how long the sniffing trial ran before the dogs measurably changed. If nothing has moved by then that's information, not failure, and page eight tells you what comes next.

Nothing on this page costs anything. If any of it works, it worked because the house changed, not because you bought something.

Go check me.

Every number in this guide came from published research. Here's all of it, so you never have to take my word for anything.

The first six months, measured. 99 adopted shelter dogs, owners surveyed at 7, 30, 90 and 180 days (C-BARQ, five Ohio shelters). Strangers, excitability, handling and training all got harder; separation behaviour and frantic attachment both eased by six months, and 93.7% still rated their dog excellent or good. Stress hormones move faster: urinary cortisol dropped significantly by day 7 in a home.

68.5% carry clinically meaningful caregiver burden, 26.1% severe. Journal of Veterinary Behavior. 333 owners at a behavior clinic, Zarit Burden Interview.

565 owners: 53% alone, 40% isolated, 33% anxious, 20% depressed, and the guilt finding. Beyond the Behavior. *Pets*, 2026.

Stress is synchronized between dog and owner, and it runs person to dog. Sundman et al., *Scientific Reports*, 2019. 58 pairs, hair cortisol. All border collies and Shetland sheepdogs, all owners women.

The guilty look is a reaction to you, not to the mess. Horowitz, *Behavioural Processes*, 2009.

The alpha wolf was a mistake. L. David Mech spent years correcting his own 1970 book. Those wolves were captive strangers, not a family.

More than five instructions made outcomes worse. Takeuchi, Houpt & Scarlett, *JAVMA*, 2000. 52 dogs.

Two weeks of sniffing measurably changed the dogs. Duranton & Horowitz, *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 2019. Nosework beat heelwork on a standard optimism test.

The 3-3-3 rule has no study behind it. A 2025 adopter survey found 30% settled inside three months, 41% at four to six, 11% at seven or more, and 19% not yet.

What we're building

ReliefPaws is making a small line of products for dogs like yours, held to the same standard as this guide: every ingredient printed on the label, nothing hidden behind the words "proprietary blend." It isn't ready yet, and we won't sell you anything before it is. You're on the list, so you'll see it first.

Written by a dog owner, not a vet. This isn't veterinary advice. Anything medical, sudden, or frightening, call yours.