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PRINTABLE PDF · 18 PAGES · 5 TRACKERS

# Dog Separation Anxiety

## *The Home-Alone Plan*

A step-by-step training plan for dogs  
who panic when you leave.

Written by the team at Calmi · [calmi-shop.net](https://calmi-shop.net)

Built on the protocol used by the ASPCA and board-certified veterinary behaviorists.

Not a substitute for veterinary or behaviorist care.

## What this plan can do, and what it can't

Your dog isn't angry at you. He isn't getting back at you for leaving. He's panicking, and panic doesn't respond to reason, or to a bigger crate, or to a stern voice at the door.

This is the training protocol veterinary behaviorists use for separation anxiety, broken into steps you can run at home, with the logs that show whether it's working. We didn't invent it — it's the standard approach, and the ASPCA publishes a version free. What we built is the version you can actually run, with a tracker that tells you the truth about your progress.

### What it can do

- Show you whether this is really separation anxiety, or one of the four things that look like it.
- Build his tolerance for being alone, starting at seconds.
- Tell you when you're pushing too fast.
- Tell you when to stop and call a professional.

### What it can't do

- **Fix this in a weekend.** Most dogs need weeks. Some need months.
- **Replace a behaviorist** for a severe case. Page 11 tells you how to find one.
- **Diagnose a medical problem.** That's the vet's job, and it's step one.

### THE PART MOST GUIDES LEAVE OUT

While you're working through this, your dog can't be left alone **except** during your practice sessions. One panicked eight-hour absence undoes the careful work underneath it. Page 6 is how people actually pull that off — if we skipped it, we'd be selling you a plan that quietly fails.

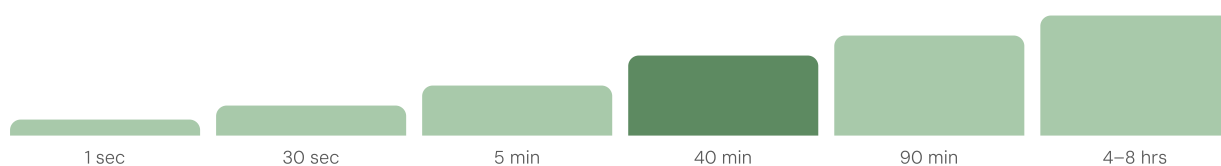
**In a hurry?** Page 3 is the entire method on one page. Print that, start there, come back for the detail when you hit something the summary doesn't cover.

# The Home-Along Plan on one page

**The rule underneath everything:** stay under his line, move it slowly, never jump it. A session where he panics is worse than no session at all.

| Phase                    | What you do                                                               | Move on when                         |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Vet first</b>         | Rule out the medical causes. Non-negotiable.                              | Your vet says he's healthy.          |
| <b>Film it</b>           | Record a 30-minute absence. Note the minute his body changes.             | You've seen it with your own eyes.   |
| <b>Zero — cues</b>       | Keys, coat, shoes, bag — perform them, don't leave. Twenty times a day.   | Full sequence, no reaction.          |
| <b>One — the door</b>    | Out, closed, open, in. Start at one second. Mix the durations.            | 30 seconds calm, ten reps, two days. |
| <b>Two — minutes</b>     | Build to 5 minutes. Go properly out of sight. Vary the door and the hour. | 5 minutes calm, three days.          |
| <b>Three — the wall</b>  | 5 to 40 minutes, in seconds. The long slog. Twice daily.                  | 40 minutes calm, twice.              |
| <b>Four — a real day</b> | 40 to 90 in 5-minute steps. Then test 4 hours. Then a full day.           | He's fine and so are you.            |

## THE WHOLE JOURNEY



Most of the work lives in one stretch: 5 to 40 minutes, added in seconds

**Three signs you've gone too far:** eyes locked on the door · lip-licking or yawning for no reason · won't take a treat he'd normally take.

**Stop and call a professional if:** he injures himself · he tries to escape through glass or from a height · he can't be left even in another room · two weeks of logging show nothing moving.

**And the hard rule:** while you're doing this, he isn't left alone except in your sessions. That one is the whole ballgame.

# Before you start: the vet, and the four impostors

A surprising number of "separation anxiety" cases are a medical problem wearing a behavioral costume. No amount of desensitization fixes a bladder, so this comes first.

### Take this list to your vet

Urinary tract infection · a weak sphincter from age · hormone changes after a spay · bladder stones · diabetes · kidney disease · Cushing's disease · neurological problems. Some dogs leak while asleep and have no idea. Ask about his medications too — several cause frequent urination, which reads as house-soiling.

Ask directly: **"Could anything physical be causing this?"** A yes just saved you six weeks of training that was never going to work.

### Then rule out the four things that look identical

| What you're seeing                                                         | What it probably is                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| He pees when you come home, tail low, ears back, maybe rolling over        | <b>Submissive or excitement urination.</b> It's about the greeting, not the absence.                               |
| Accidents sometimes, including when you're home, and always has            | <b>Incomplete house training.</b> Especially if punishment was involved — that teaches a dog to hide, not to hold. |
| Under a year, destroys things whether you're there or not, seems delighted | <b>Puppy boredom.</b> A tired dog with a job doesn't do this.                                                      |
| Only during storms, fireworks, garbage truck mornings                      | <b>Noise phobia.</b> He's not scared you left. He's scared of the bang.                                            |

**Real separation anxiety looks like this:** it starts fast, often in the first 15–30 minutes. It happens every time, not some days. It's frantic rather than busy — pacing one line, howling that doesn't stop, drooling, scratching at the door you left through. Some dogs won't touch food they'd normally inhale. And the tell that decides it: **he's fine when anyone else is home.** It's not the empty house. It's the missing person.

### AND NEVER PUNISH IT

The guilty look isn't guilt, it's appeasement — he'd do it identically about something that happened before he was born. The ASPCA is blunt: anxious behaviors aren't disobedience or spite, they're distress responses. The AVSAB advises against aversive methods in training or treating behavior disorders outright. For a fear problem, adding fear is the one thing guaranteed to move you backward. Come home boring. Clean up when he isn't watching.

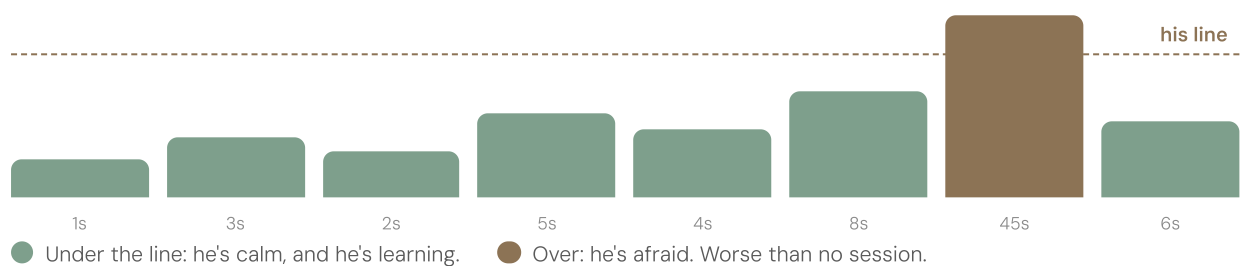
## STEP TWO

# Find his line

Your dog has a line. On one side he's alone and fine; on the other he's alone and afraid. It might sit at ten minutes, or at the click of the latch. Wherever it is, that line — his threshold — is what this whole plan moves.

**Stay under the line. Move it slowly. Never jump it.**

### WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE



*Note the zig-zag — 3 seconds, then 2, then 5, then 4. Absences that don't always get longer stay unpredictable, and unpredictable is less frightening than escalating. The tall bar is the day someone tried forty-five seconds. It cost them a week.*

## First, film him. It's the only way to know.

Everything you know about your dog alone is guesswork from wreckage. Point a phone at the door he cares about, leave exactly the way you normally leave, stay away thirty minutes, then watch it with a clock. **Write down the minute his body changes.** That number is your starting point.

### What you're looking for, earliest first

Ears back, hard stare at the door · pacing a repeated path · lip licking, yawning when he isn't tired · whining that builds · panting with no heat to explain it · drooling · rhythmic howling · scratching or biting at the exit.

The first three are the ones everybody misses. By the time a dog is howling, he's been over his line a while.

## The three signals that mean stop

1. He gets up and tracks the door with his eyes.
2. He licks his lips, or yawns, when nothing is tiring or tasty.
3. He won't take a treat he'd normally take. A dog who won't eat is over his line.

Fear learns faster than calm does. A session where he panics isn't neutral — it's negative progress, and that's the whole reason this takes weeks rather than days.

## You have to stop leaving him alone

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This is the page where a lot of plans get quietly vague. We're not going to.

While you run this protocol, your dog can't be left alone except during practice sessions. That's not our rule, it's the ASPCA's, and it falls straight out of how desensitization works. If he spends the week panicking for eight hours in an empty house, your careful nine-second door sessions aren't building anything. You'd be filling a bath with the plug out.

### How people actually manage it

- **Stack the humans.** Partner leaves at 8, you leave at 9:30, a neighbor drops in at noon. Most households have more coverage than they think, once they map it.
- **Daycare or a sitter,** even two days a week, to cover the block you genuinely can't.
- **Take him with you** for anything that allows it. A run to the store counts.
- **Cluster your work-from-home days** rather than spreading them.
- **Trade with another dog owner.** Their dog on your day off, yours on theirs. Free, and more common than you'd expect.

Fill in the planner on page 16 before you start. Not in your head — on paper, with names and hours. The gaps only become obvious when you write it down.

#### BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF HERE

For some people this is impossible right now — a job with no flex, no money for daycare, nobody nearby. If that's you, this plan won't work as written, and you deserve to hear that instead of buying six weeks of guilt. Talk to your vet about medication as a bridge and get a professional involved (page 11). Running the protocol half-way teaches your dog that the practice sessions are just the warm-up for another abandonment.

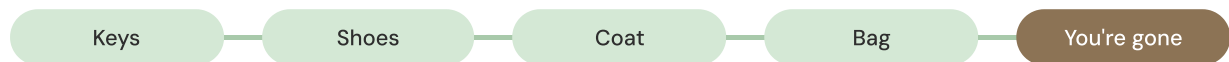
If the planner shows a gap you can't close, that's information, not defeat. Knowing it today beats discovering it in week four.

# Break the cues, then open the door

## Phase zero — make your keys boring

The dread starts at the keys, not the door. He's been studying the sequence for years. So we make it meaningless: perform the cues, then don't leave.

### THE CHAIN HE'S ACTUALLY WATCHING



*By the door, he's been afraid for four minutes. Break the first link and the rest stop predicting anything.*

Pick up your keys, sit down, watch TV. That's the whole rep. Coat and shoes on, pour a coffee, take them off. Boots and bag, hand on the door — then go and load the dishwasher.

The ASPCA is blunt about the dose, and it's the bit people underdo: he has years of learning that these cues predict a long absence, so he has to see the fake version **many times a day, for many weeks**. Not four times on Sunday. Log them on page 13 — twenty a day.

**Move on when:** you can do the full sequence — keys, coat, shoes, bag, hand on the handle — and he stays lying down. Phase one on top of an unbroken cue is just a faster way to scare him.

## Phase one — start at one second

The first absence isn't a walk round the block — it's the door closing and opening again. If that sounds insultingly small, good. Most people fail this protocol by starting at "just run to the store", roughly a hundred times over their dog's line.

### 1 Do the cue sequence, no announcement

No "back in a minute!" in the special voice. Aim for forgettable.

### 2 Step out. Close it. Open it. Come back.

One second. Say nothing on return. Boring is the goal.

### 3 Watch for the three signals

Calm is a pass. Any signal means go shorter — yes, shorter than one second: open the door, don't go through it.

### 4 Five to ten reps, twice a day

Build in pieces that feel silly. See the chart on page 5.

**Move on when:** ten reps at thirty seconds, relaxed, across two different days. One good session is luck. Two is a trend.

## The slow middle, and the forty-minute wall

Thirty seconds to five minutes takes most people a couple of weeks. It's repetitive, your dog is fine, and the temptation to skip ahead is enormous. Don't — nearly everyone who comes apart in this protocol comes apart right here.

### THE SHAPE OF EVERY SESSION



*Start under, work the edge, end on a win — never on the rep that scared him. The dashed line is his threshold.*

### What to add in phase two

- **Go properly out of sight.** Down the stairs, around the corner, into the car.
- **Vary the door and the hour.** He's tracking one specific exit.
- **Leave something to do** — a Kong, a lick mat. If he won't touch it, that's a diagnostic, not a treat: he's over his line.

**Move on when:** five minutes, relaxed, across three days, with at least one real out-of-sight departure.

### Phase three — the wall

**Most of a dog's anxious response happens inside the first forty minutes alone.** That's the good news and the bad news in one number. Bad: five to forty is the longest stretch of the plan, and the ASPCA is explicit that you build it in increments of *seconds*. Good: once you're through, the hard part is genuinely behind you.

- **Add seconds, sometimes nothing.** Some sessions just bank an easy win at yesterday's number.
- **Two sessions a day** beats one long one. Weekends are your accelerator.
- **Expect a plateau around fifteen to twenty minutes.** It's not a wall, it's a week.

**A realistic timeline.** The ASPCA notes this can be done in a few weeks with several sessions daily at weekends and twice-daily on work days — the fast version, assuming a mild-to-moderate dog and a life that bends around him. Plenty of dogs take two or three months. A rescue with a history takes as long as he takes. The only real measure of "wrong" is whether the log has moved at all in two weeks.

## Forty minutes to a working day

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Here's the reward for the patience: it speeds up. Past forty minutes the increments get generous, because you're out of the window where the panic lives.

### 1 **Forty to ninety, in five-minute steps**

Then fifteen-minute steps once that's comfortable. Same rules: log it, end easy, no straight climbs.

### 2 **Ninety minutes calm is the milestone**

The ASPCA's guidance: a dog who can do ninety without getting upset can probably handle four to eight hours.

### 3 **Don't take "probably" on trust**

Try four hours first. Film it. Then build to a full day across a few days. You've come too far to guess at the last step.

### 4 **Keep the camera on a while**

The video is the only honest report card. "He seemed fine" has been wrong before.

## Holding on to it

- **Keep doing fake departures** occasionally, forever. Keys up, keys down. Costs nothing.
- **Expect wobbles after disruption** — a vacation, a move, two weeks of you home sick. Normal.
- **A regression isn't a reset.** Go back two phases, not to page one. It returns far faster the second time.

And then one ordinary Tuesday you'll leave for work and realize, halfway down the road, that you didn't think about it. That's what finished looks like. No ceremony.

## Troubleshooting

He was fine at 10 minutes. Today he panicked at 4.

**Normal.** Dogs have bad days. Drop to a duration he passed easily last week, three sessions there, then creep up. If it happens three sessions running, something changed in the house — go looking for it.

He's stuck at the same number for two weeks.

**Plateaus are real.** Check you're not always climbing — mix in shorter reps. Check the cues are still dead (page 7). If it's genuinely frozen for two weeks, that's your signal to bring in a professional rather than grind.

Calm on camera, but the neighbors still report howling.

**Trust the neighbors.** Your camera probably covers one room, or the howling starts after you stopped recording. Extend it well past your return.

Fine when I leave, destroys things later.

**Likely boredom, not anxiety.** Anxious destruction clusters near the exit and starts early. Boredom roams and starts when the nap ends. Different problem — enrichment, not desensitization.

He won't touch the stuffed Kong.

**He's over his line.** A dog refusing food he normally loves is telling you the duration is too long. Shorten it until he eats. The Kong is a thermometer as much as a treat.

I had to leave him a full day. Did I ruin it?

**No, but it cost you.** Life happens. Back two phases, easy sessions for a few days, rebuild. One bad absence isn't fatal; a pattern of them is what stalls people.

He panics in the crate but settles behind a baby gate.

**Then don't crate him.** Crates help some dogs and frighten others. Heavy panting, drooling, frantic escape attempts or non-stop howling in the crate mean it's the wrong tool for this dog. A gated room is fine.

## When to stop, and who to call

There's a version of this problem a PDF can't touch. Pretending otherwise would be the most expensive thing in this guide.

### STOP THE PLAN AND GET HELP IF

He injures himself — bloodied paws, broken teeth, torn claws · he tries to escape through glass or from a height · he can't be left even while you're in another room · he's stopped eating generally · the panic is worsening week on week despite a well-run plan · or two weeks of honest logging show no movement.

### Who to actually call

- **Board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB).** A vet with specialist behavior training. Can diagnose and prescribe. Strongest option for a severe case.
- **Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB).** Advanced degree in behavior science, works alongside your vet.
- **Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT).** Can be excellent — but the ASPCA notes that expertise in treating fear with desensitization isn't required for the certificate. Ask directly how many separation anxiety cases they've run and what their method is. If the answer involves corrections or dominance, walk away.

### The medication question

A lot of owners flinch at this, and it stops dogs getting help they'd benefit from. The honest picture: for severe cases, some dogs are so distressed by any separation that training can't start — there's no duration short enough to be under their line. Medication can lower the baseline enough to make the protocol possible, and can speed up progress for dogs who'd have managed the slow way.

What it isn't: a replacement for the training. Most dogs need both. Bring the video and the log to your vet — concrete evidence beats "he gets upset" — and ask what they'd expect it to do, by when, and what weaning off looks like.

### NEVER DO THIS PART ALONE

Never give your dog any medication for a behavior problem without your vet. That includes anything left over from another pet, anything human, and anything recommended in a forum. Dose and interactions are not guessable.

Needing one of these people isn't a failure of effort, and it isn't a failure of love. Severe separation anxiety is a genuine anxiety disorder. You wouldn't try to out-schedule a broken leg.

## The one thing that makes the early weeks easier

The hardest part of this plan is the beginning — when his line sits at nine seconds and every session is a negotiation with a dog who's already braced.

That's the stretch where a lower baseline helps most. A dog who starts each session a little less wound up gives you more room under the line, and more room under the line is exactly what buys progress.

### The Calming Collar

Pheromone-based, no sedation, no personality change. Pheromones work as a background safety signal — the same signal a mother dog gives her litter — so it lowers the baseline quietly while you do the real work in this guide. Four collars per pack, up to sixty days per collar.

**90-day money-back guarantee.** Dogs differ, so find out cheaply whether yours is one who responds.

Get the Calming Collar at [calmi-shop.net](https://calmi-shop.net)

### Straight about what it is

A collar doesn't treat separation anxiety, and we won't tell you it does. Only the protocol in this guide teaches your dog that you come back. Put a collar on him and change nothing else, and expect nothing. It's a support to the plan — a useful one in the weeks that are hardest — never a substitute for it.

That's the whole pitch, and it's the same thing we'd tell you if you rang us. If you'd rather run the plan without it, run the plan without it — it works either way.

## Departure cue log

One tally per fake cue — keys picked up and put down, coat on and off. Target twenty a day, until he stops caring.

| Day | Tally (aim for 20) | Total | Did he get up? |
|-----|--------------------|-------|----------------|
| Mon |                    |       |                |
| Tue |                    |       |                |
| Wed |                    |       |                |
| Thu |                    |       |                |
| Fri |                    |       |                |
| Sat |                    |       |                |
| Sun |                    |       |                |

### Which cues still get a reaction?

Tick the ones he still tracks. Work those hardest.

|             |                   |           |
|-------------|-------------------|-----------|
| Keys        | Shoes             | Coat      |
|             |                   |           |
| Bag         | Laptop closing    | Alarm set |
|             |                   |           |
| Door handle | Make-up / shaving | Other:    |
|             |                   |           |

*Move to phase one only when the full sequence — keys, coat, shoes, bag, handle — gets no reaction at all.*

# Session tracker

One row per rep. Under the line means: no door-staring, no lip-licking or yawning, took food normally. Anything else is over.

[illegible]

**Rules for the sheet:** start every session below his best · never end on a fail · three over-the-line reps in a row means stop for the day · if the numbers haven't moved in two weeks, read page 11.

*Print several — you'll fill one a week, and the old ones are how you prove to yourself it's working. Write down the bad sessions too. Nobody's marking it.*

## Where the sessions actually fit

Two sessions a day on work days, more at weekends. Write the real times, not the aspirational ones.

| Day | Session 1 — time & who | Session 2 — time & who | Phase / target |
|-----|------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Mon |                        |                        |                |
| Tue |                        |                        |                |
| Wed |                        |                        |                |
| Thu |                        |                        |                |
| Fri |                        |                        |                |
| Sat |                        |                        |                |
| Sun |                        |                        |                |

### This week I'm working on

|                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| Phase                     |  |
| Current best duration     |  |
| Target by Sunday          |  |
| What went wrong last week |  |

*If you can't find two slots on a work day, that's worth knowing now. See page 6, and be honest about whether this is the right season of your life to run this.*

## Coverage planner

Every hour you're out this week, someone has the dog or he's in a session. Fill in names. The gaps are the point — you're looking for them, not hiding them.

| Day | Hours I'm out | Who has him (name) | Gap? |
|-----|---------------|--------------------|------|
| Mon |               |                    |      |
| Tue |               |                    |      |
| Wed |               |                    |      |
| Thu |               |                    |      |
| Fri |               |                    |      |
| Sat |               |                    |      |
| Sun |               |                    |      |

### My options, written down

|                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| People who could help           |  |
| Daycare / sitter (cost per day) |  |
| Places he can come with me      |  |
| Days I can work from home       |  |
| Dog owner I could swap with     |  |

**If the "gap" column has ticks you can't clear:** don't start yet. Read page 6 again, then talk to your vet about medication as a bridge and get a professional involved (page 11). That's a better use of the next six weeks than a protocol that can't work.

## Sources

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We'd rather show our working than have you take our word for it. All of these are free, and all are worth your time.

**ASPCA — Separation Anxiety.** The backbone of this guide: medical rule-outs, the behaviors that mimic separation anxiety, departure-cue decoupling, the 40-minute window, the 90-minute milestone, crate guidance, and the rule that a dog in treatment can't be left alone outside sessions.

[aspca.org/pet-care/dog-care/common-dog-behavior-issues/separation-anxiety](https://aspca.org/pet-care/dog-care/common-dog-behavior-issues/separation-anxiety)

**AVSAB — Position Statement on Humane Dog Training (2021).** The professional consensus that aversive methods shouldn't be used in training or in treating behavior disorders.

[avsab.org](https://avsab.org) — Humane Dog Training Position Statement, 2021

**AVSAB — Position Statement on the Use of Punishment for Behavior Modification in Animals.** Why punishment escalates fear-based behavior instead of resolving it.

[avsab.org/resources/position-statements](https://avsab.org/resources/position-statements)

**ASPCA — Finding Professional Behavior Help.** How to find a Dip ACVB, CAAB or ACAAB near you, and what the letters mean.

[aspca.org/pet-care/general-pet-care/behavioral-help-your-pet](https://aspca.org/pet-care/general-pet-care/behavioral-help-your-pet)

**Meneses, T. et al. (2021). Review of epidemiological, pathological, genetic, and epigenetic factors of canine separation anxiety. JAVMA 259(10).** On how common this is: estimates vary a lot by method — this review cites 14.4% and a 14–20% range, alongside a study finding 6%. Anyone quoting one confident number is rounding off a real disagreement.

[avmajournals.avma.org](https://avmajournals.avma.org) — JAVMA 259(10)

**Sargisson, R.J. (2014). Canine separation anxiety: strategies for treatment and management. Veterinary Medicine: Research and Reports.** A review of what the evidence does and doesn't support.

[pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7521022](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7521022)

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**What this guide is not.** It isn't veterinary advice and it can't diagnose your dog. It's an implementation of a published protocol, written by dog owners, not vets. For a severe case, or if anything here doesn't match what you're seeing, your vet and a board-certified veterinary behaviorist are the people to trust over us.

**Calmi**

*One ordinary Tuesday, you'll leave for work and forget to worry about it.*

That's the whole goal. Not a dog who's been told off into silence — a dog who genuinely doesn't mind, because you took it slowly enough that he never had to be afraid.

It takes weeks. Some days go backward. Keep the log honest and go at his pace, not yours.

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Calm begets calm.

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