Maryam Kamali · Pawsitive Manners · 650-353-0588 · Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · www.PawsitiveManners.com

A GUIDE FOR ADOPTERS AND FOSTERS

From Survival to Safety

A Trauma-Informed Guide to Welcoming Dogs from Difficult Backgrounds

Science-based, positive reinforcement, and force-free approaches for a smoother transition and a stronger recovery

By Maryam Kamali · Certified Professional Dog Behavior Consultant and Trainer · Pawsitive Manners

Every dog who arrives from a difficult background carries invisible luggage. They may have known neglect, abuse, deprivation, chaos, or simply never learned that the world can be safe. Whatever the history, they all arrive with the same fundamental need: to feel that this place, and these people, are different.

This guide gives you the science, the practical tools, and the compassionate framework to help make that difference. Whether you are adopting permanently or fostering temporarily, the approaches in these pages are the same: patient, positive, force-free, and built around who your dog actually is.

Contents

Maryam Kamali · Pawsitive Manners · 650-353-0588 · Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · www.PawsitiveManners.com

PART 1 · WHAT TRAUMA DOES TO A DOG'S BRAIN

Trauma is a physical event, not just an emotional one.

When we talk about a traumatized dog, we are not speaking loosely or metaphorically. Trauma — defined as any experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope — produces measurable, documented changes in the brain. A 2024 study published in *Animals* applied the emerging framework of trauma-informed care directly to dogs, confirming that adverse early experiences alter stress-response systems in ways that persist long after the experience has ended.

Three key brain structures are affected most:

- **The amygdala** — the brain's threat-detection system — becomes hyperreactive. It begins firing at stimuli that pose no real danger, because in the dog's history, similar stimuli preceded harm. This is why a rescue dog might freeze at the sound of keys, a certain tone of voice, or a man in a hat: their amygdala is doing exactly what it was trained to do by their past.
- **The hippocampus** — which files experiences as memories — can be physically reduced in volume by chronic stress. This impairs a dog's ability to categorize experiences as "safe" or "no longer relevant," causing fear responses to generalize across many stimuli rather than remaining tied to specific triggers.
- **The prefrontal cortex** — responsible for decision-making, impulse control, and the ability to learn new responses — effectively goes "offline" during states of high stress or fear. This is why punishing a fearful dog is not only unkind, it is neurobiologically ineffective: the learning center of the brain is not available.

A traumatized dog is not disobedient, stubborn, or broken. Their brain is working exactly as trauma conditioned it to. Healing requires a different kind of experience — one that is safe, predictable, and chosen — repeated enough times to build new pathways.

Why dogs from difficult backgrounds are especially vulnerable.

Dogs who experienced trauma during the critical developmental window (roughly 3 to 14 weeks of age) are at highest risk for lasting behavioral effects, because this is when the brain's stress-response system is being calibrated. A puppy who experienced chaos, abuse, or total deprivation during this window may have a stress system that is permanently set to a higher baseline — though research now confirms this can be significantly improved with the right environment.

Dogs who also experienced trauma during adolescence (roughly 6 to 18 months) face particular challenges, as this is another high-vulnerability period where the developing brain is especially sensitive to stressful events. Adolescent trauma can produce lasting changes in anxiety and reactivity even in dogs with good early foundations.

The critical insight is this: trauma is not destiny. The same neuroplasticity that allows trauma to reshape the brain also allows healing experiences to reshape it. Every calm interaction, every moment of genuine safety, every act of choice and agency is a neurobiological event that contributes to recovery. It takes time — often a long time — but it is real.

Maryam Kamali · Pawsitive Manners · 650-353-0588 · Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · www.PawsitiveManners.com

PART 2 · BEFORE THEY ARRIVE: PREPARING YOUR HOME

Set up before the dog walks in.

The single highest-impact thing you can do for a traumatized dog is arrange their environment before they arrive. A dog in a new place is already overwhelmed by scent, sound, and unfamiliar stimuli. Arriving to a prepared, calm, low-demand environment gives their nervous system the best possible starting conditions.

The safe space.

Designate one quiet area — a corner of a bedroom, a crate with the door open and three sides covered with a blanket, a space behind a sofa — that will be this dog's unconditional retreat. Stock it with soft bedding, a worn item of your clothing for scent familiarity, and a lick mat or chew. This space should be permanently off-limits to children, other pets, and visitors. It must never be used for anything the dog finds unpleasant.

The home layout.

- Use baby gates to create zones and limit access to the full home initially. Too much space too soon is overwhelming for a traumatized dog.
- Identify and temporarily remove or secure anything that might trigger an escape attempt: unsecured doors, low fences, gaps in gates.
- Keep the home quieter than usual for the first days. Turn down the TV, hold off on visitors, cancel the noisy social gathering.
- Feed all pets separately during the adjustment period to prevent resource guarding from developing.
- Have high-value treats (soft, smelly, irresistible) already stocked and accessible throughout the home.

The car journey home.

For many rescue dogs, the journey to a new home is yet another stressful transport experience added to many others. Keep it quiet: no loud music, no excited talk, no stops at busy places. If your dog is in a crate, cover it. If they are in the car freely, offer a lick mat to activate the parasympathetic nervous system during the drive. When you arrive, give them time to sniff around the yard or outside space before entering the house.

The first 24 hours.

Resist the understandable urge to introduce, show off, celebrate, and include. Your new dog needs to smell every corner of their new world on their own terms. Let them explore at their pace. Sit on the floor nearby and do nothing in particular. Toss treats gently into their path. Do not reach toward them or try to pet them. Just be a calm, non-demanding presence that occasionally produces good things.

Important: *Do not host a welcome party. Do not invite friends over to meet the new dog in the first week. Do not take them to the dog park, a busy trail, or a pet store. The first priority is decompression, not experience. There will be plenty of time for adventures once a foundation of safety is built.*

Not sure how to set up your home for your specific dog's history or needs? Maryam can help you create the right environment before your dog even arrives.

Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · 650-353-0588 · www.PawsitiveManners.com

Maryam Kamali · Pawsitive Manners · 650-353-0588 · Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · www.PawsitiveManners.com

PART 3 · READING YOUR DOG'S BODY LANGUAGE

Your dog is always communicating. Your job is to learn to listen.

Dogs communicate almost entirely through body language — posture, movement, facial expression, and subtle shifts in muscle tension. For a traumatized dog, this is often their only form of self-advocacy. When we miss these signals, dogs learn that communication does not work — and they either escalate (growling, snapping) or shut down entirely. Both outcomes are preventable when we learn to hear the quieter signals first.

Signs of Stress	Signs of Comfort
• Whale eye (whites of eyes showing)	• Soft, relaxed eyes without tension
• Ears pinned back or flattened	• Ears in a neutral or slightly forward position
• Tail tucked between legs	• Loose, wagging tail (mid-height)
• Crouching or lowered body posture	• Wiggly, loose body posture
• Lip licking or nose licking	• Approaching you voluntarily
• Yawning (when not tired)	• Sighing and settling down
• Panting (when not hot or thirsty)	• Playbow (front low, rear up)
• Freezing completely still	• Offering soft eye contact
• Showing teeth (air snap or growl)	• Relaxed, slightly open mouth
• Refusing food they normally love	• Leaning against you gently
• Excessive shedding in place	• Investigating the environment with interest
• Avoiding eye contact, turning away	• Eating and drinking normally

Freezing and shutdown are often mistaken for calmness or "good behavior." They are not. A dog who has gone very still, broken eye contact, and stopped responding is often in a state of stress shutdown — the nervous system's last attempt to cope before an escalation. Always treat stillness in a new dog as a signal to reduce pressure, not a signal to proceed.

The stress signals to act on immediately.

If your dog is showing any of the stress signals above, your response matters enormously. The goal is always to reduce the trigger — increase distance, remove the pressure, give them more space. Never push through a stress signal. Never tell a frightened dog to "get over it." The moment you see whale eye, freezing, or a growl, treat it as information: *I am too close to something that feels unsafe right now.* Honor it.

Maryam Kamali · Pawsitive Manners · 650-353-0588 · Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · www.PawsitiveManners.com

PART 4 · THE 3-3-3 FRAMEWORK: A TIMELINE FOR TRANSITION

A roadmap, not a deadline.

The 3-3-3 Framework is a widely used and well-supported guideline for understanding how rescue dogs typically adjust after a major transition. It describes three broad phases: three days of acute decompression, three weeks of settling and routine-learning, and three months of deepening trust and true bonding. It is a roadmap, not a deadline. Dogs from traumatic backgrounds often take longer at each stage — and that is completely normal.

3	3	3
DAYS	WEEKS	MONTHS
Decompression	**Settling In**	**Trust & Home**

The first 3 days: decompression.

Your dog is overwhelmed. Everything — the smells, the sounds, the people, the textures underfoot, the light levels, the other animals — is new. Their nervous system is in a state of hyper-alert scanning. They may not eat, may not drink, may hide, may pace, may sleep excessively, or may seem unnaturally calm (shutdown). All of this is normal.

- Keep the home quieter than usual. No visitors. No outings to busy places.
- Let your dog move through the space at their own pace, without pressure to interact.
- Toss treats gently without making eye contact or leaning over them.
- Provide the safe space and let them use it as much as they need.
- Potty breaks in a quiet, consistent area on a predictable schedule.
- Do not attempt any formal training. Just let them breathe.

Weeks 1–3: settling and learning.

Your dog's true personality begins to emerge — including, sometimes, behaviors that were not visible while they were shut down. This is a good sign: a dog who begins testing limits, exploring, playing, or even grumbling is a dog coming out of survival mode. Continue with calm consistency.

- Establish a predictable daily rhythm: meals, walks, play, rest at consistent times.
- Begin short, fun, low-stakes positive reinforcement training — just 2–5 minutes.
- Introduce new things very gradually — new rooms, short car trips, quiet outdoor spaces.

- Continue honoring stress signals and backing off when needed.
- Introduce new people one at a time, using Treat and Retreat principles.

Months 1–3: trust and bonding.

By the end of the third month, most dogs have a genuine sense of home. They anticipate your routines, seek your company, and demonstrate real emotional investment in the relationship. For dogs from traumatic backgrounds, this is also the period when some deeper behavioral issues may surface — not because anything went wrong, but because the dog finally feels safe enough to be themselves. Seek professional support early if complex behaviors emerge, rather than waiting.

Remember: *For dogs with severe trauma histories, the 3-3-3 timeline may be more like 3-3-6 or even 3-3-12. Full emotional security can take a year or more. This is not failure. It is the reality of how deep healing works.*

Wondering what phase your dog is in, or why progress feels slow? A Behavior Consultation with Maryam can give you clarity and a clear next step.

Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · 650-353-0588 · www.PawsitiveManners.com

Maryam Kamali · Pawsitive Manners · 650-353-0588 · Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · www.PawsitiveManners.com

PART 5 · THE SCIENCE OF BUILDING SAFETY

Safety is not the absence of triggers. It is what you build.

Safety for a traumatized dog is not about removing every possible stressor from their world — that is neither possible nor ultimately helpful. It is about building a relationship and an environment in which the dog's nervous system learns, through repeated experience, that this place is different. That these people are different. That the future is more predictable than the past.

The four pillars of a safe recovery environment.

1. Predictability. A traumatized brain spends enormous energy anticipating threat. Consistent routines — meals, walks, rest, training, bedtime at the same times each day — gradually teach the nervous system that the world is not random. Predictability is not rigidity; it is the scaffolding on which safety is built.

2. Agency and choice. Research on learned helplessness shows that the inability to influence one's environment is one of the most psychologically damaging experiences for any animal. Give your dog genuine choices: whether to approach, when to disengage, which direction on a walk. Every small act of choice rebuilds the belief that actions have safe and reliable outcomes.

3. Co-regulation. Dogs and their humans synchronize physiologically. Your cortisol levels affect theirs — and theirs affect yours. Research confirms that long-term cortisol levels in dogs mirror those of their guardians. A calm, regulated guardian is not just kind; it is biologically regulating for your dog. Your own state matters as much as any training technique.

4. Enrichment that meets real needs. Sniffing, foraging, chewing, and gentle exploration are not luxuries. They activate the parasympathetic nervous system, lower cortisol, and create states of positive engagement incompatible with fear. Scatter feeding, sniff walks, lick mats, and snuffle mats are not optional add-ons — they are neurobiological tools for recovery.

Counterconditioning and desensitization: the evidence base.

These two techniques, used together, are the gold standard in the force-free world for changing fear responses. **Desensitization** means gradual, controlled exposure to a fear trigger at a level low enough that no stress response is triggered — far enough away, quiet enough, brief enough. **Counterconditioning** means pairing that exposure with something the dog loves, changing the emotional association at a neurological level.

The critical variable is always threshold distance: the point at which the dog notices a trigger without reacting to it. Every session should stay below that point. Crossing it — even once — rehearses the fear response and sets the process back. Going slowly is not a compromise; it is the most efficient path to lasting change.

Positive reinforcement does not just teach behaviors. Each rewarded moment releases dopamine and builds neural pathways associated with confidence and safety. Force-free methods are not the ‘nice’ option. They are the neurologically correct option for a brain that has already been damaged by coercion.

Maryam Kamali · Pawsitive Manners · 650-353-0588 · Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · www.PawsitiveManners.com

PART 6 · TRAINING PRINCIPLES THAT WORK

Relationship before training.

Before a traumatized dog can learn new behaviors, they need to learn one thing: that you are safe. This may take days. It may take weeks. During this time, formal training is not the priority. Being a consistent, calm, predictable source of good things is. Toss treats without expectation. Sit nearby without demanding attention. Move slowly and quietly. Every single one of these moments is depositing into a trust account that was heavily overdrawn long before you arrived.

The training principles that change everything.

Always mark and reward the behavior you want. Use a clear verbal marker (“Yes!”) or clicker the instant the desired behavior occurs, followed immediately by a high-value treat. Marking the exact moment tells your dog precisely what earned the reward. Without the marker, the learning is blurry. With it, it is precise.

Short, frequent sessions. Two to five minutes, multiple times per day, is far more effective for a traumatized dog than a single long session. Long sessions in a compromised nervous system increase the likelihood of stress, shutdown, and failure. End every session before your dog’s engagement drops.

End on a win. The last thing your dog experienced in a training session is what they associate with the whole session. Always end with something easy and successful. A simple sit, a name response, or a Find It game — something they know well and feel confident doing.

Ignore everything you don’t want to reinforce. For a traumatized dog, punishment — even mild verbal correction — is disproportionately damaging. If your dog does something you don’t want, simply do not reinforce it and redirect toward something you do want. Never punish stress behaviors: growling, freezing, and hiding are communication, not defiance. Punishing them removes your warning signal.

Use management, not correction. If your dog is likely to practice a behavior you don’t want — resource guarding, bolting through doors, jumping on guests — prevent the opportunity rather than correcting the behavior after the fact. Management is not giving up; it is protecting the dog’s brain from rehearsing patterns you are trying to change.

The exercises that build trust fastest.

- **The Name Game:** Say your dog’s name, toss a treat. No conditions required. Builds a positive association with your voice.
- **Scatter Feeding:** Toss treats across the grass or a snuffle mat. Activates the parasympathetic system through nose-led searching.
- **Consent Checks:** Pause every 3–5 seconds during petting and let your dog choose to re-engage. Teaches that “no” will always be respected.

• **Treat and Retreat:** Helper tosses treats behind the dog when they orient toward a new person. Builds positive associations without pressure.

• **Capturing Calm:** Any time your dog spontaneously settles or sighs, quietly mark and toss a treat. Teaches that calm is the most rewarding choice.

• **Relaxation Mat:** Reinforce your dog for lying on a specific mat. Over time the mat becomes a portable safe space with a conditioned calming effect.

Want hands-on guidance with any of these exercises for your specific dog? Maryam offers Behavior Consultations tailored to rescue and foster situations.

Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · 650-353-0588 · www.PawsitiveManners.com

Maryam Kamali · Pawsitive Manners · 650-353-0588 · Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · www.PawsitiveManners.com

PART 7 · COMMON CHALLENGES AND WHAT TO DO

Not eating for the first day or two.

Extremely common during acute decompression. As long as your dog is drinking water, this is normal stress physiology. Leave food in their safe space and do not fuss. Try hand feeding small pieces of high-value food at a distance, tossed rather than offered. If the dog has not eaten in 48 hours, contact your vet.

Diarrhea or digestive upset.

The gut is extremely sensitive to cortisol. Loose stool and digestive upset in the first few days is almost universal in newly placed dogs. Feed bland food for 48 hours if needed. If it persists beyond 72 hours, contains blood, or is accompanied by lethargy or vomiting, see your vet.

Not engaging, flat, or seemingly ‘too calm.’

This is shutdown, not adjustment. A dog who is lying still, avoiding eye contact, and not responding to food or gentle interaction is overwhelmed. Reduce all stimulation further. Leave them entirely alone in their safe space. Do not try to entice or engage. Shutdown resolves with time and consistent evidence of safety, not with increased interaction.

Hyperactivity, zoomies, or inability to settle.

Some dogs respond to overwhelming stress with hyperarousal rather than shutdown. Stick to the routine, limit stimulation, and offer a lick mat or frozen Kong to help the parasympathetic system engage. Avoid high-energy play in the first weeks as this amplifies arousal without building emotional regulation. Decompression sniff walks and scatter feeding are more regulating than fetch or tug at this stage.

Resource guarding.

Dogs who have had inconsistent access to food, toys, or space may guard these resources intensely. Do not attempt to take things away or correct guarding behavior — this is a trauma response to resource insecurity. Feed separately from other pets, do not interrupt mealtimes, and approach resource guarding with a ‘trade’ philosophy rather than removal. Significant resource guarding warrants professional support early.

Escape attempts and fence-running.

A traumatized dog who has not yet bonded with their environment may attempt to escape. Double-check all doors, gates, and fences before the dog arrives. Walk on a well-fitted harness and double-lead (leash attached to both collar and harness) until a solid recall and bond have been established. Never correct an escape attempt; instead build the reinforcement history that makes staying with you more rewarding than

leaving.

Growling or snapping.

Growling is communication, not aggression. It is your dog telling you, as clearly as they can, that they are uncomfortable and need space. A dog who growls is a dog who is still communicating. Never punish a growl — doing so removes the warning and creates a dog who bites without warning. Back off, reduce pressure, and identify what triggered the communication so you can address it safely.

Important: *If growling or snapping escalates, involves children, or is unpredictable, seek professional support immediately. This is not a behavior to manage with YouTube videos or online advice. A qualified force-free trainer or veterinary behaviorist can build a safe, effective plan.*

Maryam Kamali · Pawsitive Manners · 650-353-0588 · Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · www.PawsitiveManners.com

PART 8 · CARING FOR YOURSELF

You cannot pour from an empty cup.

Fostering and adopting traumatized dogs is some of the most meaningful work in the animal welfare world — and some of the most emotionally demanding. It is normal to feel overwhelmed, grieved, frustrated, attached, and exhausted, sometimes all in the same afternoon. These feelings do not mean you are failing. They mean you are paying attention.

What secondary stress feels like.

People who care for traumatized animals often develop their own stress responses: hypervigilance about the dog's every behavior, difficulty relaxing when things seem to be going well, grief for the dog's past, and anxiety about the future. This is a form of secondary trauma or compassion fatigue, and it is real.

- Set realistic expectations and revisit them often. Recovery is not linear.
- Celebrate small wins: a spontaneous approach, a relaxed sigh, a wagging tail. These are enormous milestones.
- Connect with other adopters and fosters who understand the experience.
- Reach out to a professional when you feel stuck. You are not meant to do this alone.
- Remember that your dog's slow progress is not a reflection of your effort or your love.

Your emotional state is a training tool.

Science confirms that your dog's long-term cortisol levels mirror yours. This is not a pressure point — it is an invitation. When you are stressed, tense, or anxious during interactions with your dog, that state is transmitted. When you are calm, regulated, and genuinely relaxed, that is transmitted too. Taking care of your own nervous system is not a luxury. It is part of the work.

The most powerful thing you can offer a traumatized dog is not a perfect training plan. It is a guardian who shows up, day after day, as a calm, consistent, and trustworthy presence. That is what healing is built from.

Feeling stuck, overwhelmed, or unsure of the next step? You don't have to navigate this alone. Maryam is here to support both you and your dog.

Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · 650-353-0588 · www.PawsitiveManners.com

PART 9 · WHEN TO GET PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Getting help early is not a sign of failure. It is good strategy.

Many behavioral challenges in rescue dogs respond well to early, professional intervention and become significantly harder to address the longer they are left to solidify. If you are seeing any of the following, do not wait:

- Persistent refusal to eat beyond 48 hours, or significant weight loss.
- Any growling, snapping, or biting directed at people or other animals.
- Severe anxiety when left alone (destruction, self-injury, continuous vocalization).
- A dog who has not improved or shown any positive signs after several weeks.
- Behaviors that feel unsafe or that you are not confident managing on your own.
- Any behavior around children that gives you concern.

We're here to help you both thrive.

Welcoming a dog from a traumatic background is one of the most rewarding things you can do. It is also one of the most nuanced. Every dog is different, and having professional support makes the journey smoother and more successful for everyone involved.

A Behavior Consultation with Pawsitive Manners can:

- Help you understand your dog's specific triggers, stress signals, and history.
- Create a personalized, force-free plan for your home and your dog's individual needs.
- Coach you on body language, threshold management, and building confidence step by step.
- Connect you with veterinary behaviorist support if medication may also be beneficial.

You don't have to figure this out alone — and your dog deserves a plan built around who they actually are.

Maryam Kamali · Certified Professional Dog Behavior Consultant and Trainer

Maryam@PawsitiveManners.com · 650-353-0588 · www.PawsitiveManners.com