

The Black Dog: An Owner's Manual.

Congratulations on becoming the owner of your very own black dog.

Most people who own black dogs never intended to. The black dog was just sitting by their bed one day when they woke up. Or he had been lurking at the back door for a while and finally moved in. And most black dog owners agree they don't really have time for it. The black dog seems to get in the way of all the things that are beautiful and fun in life.

The black dog is quite different from the blue dog, although they are related. The blue dog sometimes moves in when you are grieving, under great stress, going through a break up or making difficult changes in your life. He makes you feel a little...well, blue. The blue dog can be difficult to manage, but he's not likely to move into your house for good and may only stay a few weeks.

But the black dog...Well, sometimes it feels if the black dog owns you – and not the other way around. If you've never owned a black dog before, and are wondering what to do with him, this guide is for you. Most owners agree: the brute needs looking after, and you need some strategies to help you live with the black dog.

Give the dog space, but not too much.

Respecting the space the black dog needs is important. You will not feel like a party animal with a black dog clinging to your back. So take time out and be alone if that is what you need to do.

But the black dog is a solitary creature. He'd like it to be just the two of you. Forever. Even though that's what the black dog is craving, too much time alone might not be the best thing for you right now.

So you need to find a way to stay connected. By all means, screen your calls - but try to return one each day. Or if talking seems too hard, email just one of the people who love

you. They are still there. It's very important that you keep talking to people. Dogs - and black dogs particularly - aren't really good conversationalists.

But when you don't want to talk to anyone, don't beat yourself up over it. Wander around a shopping mall or go to a movie. Walk to a cafe and drink good coffee in the sun. Stay in the world, even if only for a little while.

Feed the black dog.

Owning a black dog can play havoc with your eating habits. Sometimes he won't want to eat and food holds no appeal. Eat simply and regularly, even if you can only face soup and toast. Sometimes he won't want to stop eating and could happily devour the entire freezer section of the local supermarket. At these times, eat well and concentrate on fruit and vegetables.

A word of warning - black dogs and alcohol don't mix. Alcohol is a depressant, which can make the black dog even meaner. Have you ever seen a drunken Doberman? Alcohol also doesn't mix with the prescription medications you may be prescribed to help you with the black dog. So avoid alcohol, and avoid other drugs too. Your body and mind are coping with enough already.

Remember that the soul also needs to be fed. Do things that comfort and nourish you. Read - but avoid beauty magazines and self-help books. Start a journal. Meditate. Listen to music. Get a massage. Swim in the ocean. Get enough sleep. Watch a comedy and laugh if you can. Try to get out of the house at least once a day.

Do one of these things every day, even if the black dog doesn't want to.

Exercise and the black dog.

A little gentle exercise is so good for the black dog. It releases chemicals in the body which can ease depression. But the black dog loves bed. He'd like you to stay there all day. Bargaining may be the only option: make an agreement with the black dog that if

you can take him round the block, he can curl up in bed afterwards. Sometimes, he won't even want to go back to bed after you've been out.

And if you miss a day, be gentle with yourself. Try again tomorrow. Aim for a little exercise every day. Anything is better than nothing.

When the black dog won't listen.

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, the black dog will not stay on his lead. He will not sit or stay, and he certainly won't heel. These are the times when you literally can't get out of bed. Can't be bothered showering. Can't stop crying. Can't see the point in carrying on.

Your black dog needs immediate remedial obedience training. Take him to see your doctor.

Your GP might suggest trying medication to help tame the black dog. Anti-depressants are very effective for many people. Don't be alarmed at the thought of taking medication. If you had a heart condition, you wouldn't hesitate to take the medicine your doctor prescribed. You have a medical condition, just like many other people. Your doctor might also suggest you see a counsellor, psychotherapist, psychologist or a psychiatrist. Your doctor and other health professionals are your allies and will work with you to get the black dog back under control.

Introducing the black dog to other people.

For years, owning a black dog has been something that people just don't talk about. Many black dog owners say that they were afraid of admitting to black dog ownership. They worried that people would think that they were weak or self-indulgent. But talking about the black dog can lighten the load. You can talk to family, friends, your doctor or neighbours. You might be surprised to find that one of your friends also has a black dog. Or their brother does. Or their sister's boyfriend. Or their mother. Or their child.

Your friends, family and those who love you will check in on you now and then and be thinking of you every day. When you can't get out from under the black dog's paw, let your friends bring you milk, bread and toilet paper. It's a cliché, but that's what friends are for. And one day, you might be called upon to return the favour.

You are not your black dog.

Sometimes, it feels like all you are is the black dog. It feels like there is nothing else. But that's not the case. You are also the clever, loving, beautiful, successful person everyone says you are. It can just be very hard to see it when the black dog casts its shadow.

Some of the world's most amazingly talented and successful people have also owned black dogs. Brooke Shields, Stephen Hawking, John Cleese, Rachel Griffiths...all have shared with the world their experiences of the black dog.

If you can, keep some perspective - however small it may be. Remember, you didn't always feel like this. You won't always feel like this. You are not alone.

When the black dog sleeps.

Sometimes the black dog sleeps or even, bless him, goes into hibernation. One morning you might wake up to find the black dog isn't at the end of your bed. He's not under it, and he's not waiting in the kitchen either. Breathe in. The air feels lighter. And smells sweeter. Stretch.

Use this time to enjoy some space from the black dog. See the friends you have missed. See movies or shows. Get back to the gym, or start painting again. Tidy up the house.

Good luck...

The black dog can bring with him the darkest hours in your life. But sometimes, knowing the darkest hours helps you appreciate the brighter days. You can take pleasure in the

smallest things - a friendly smile on the train, the jacaranda trees in spring, a friend's good news.

And each time the black dog pays you a visit, you get better at anticipating and managing him. You learn to recognise the black dog as he pads down the hallway towards you. He becomes a little less scary the more time you spend with him, until he becomes - if not a friend - then a familiar companion. And since you've survived his visits before, you know that you can get through them again.

The black dog can teach you to be gentle with yourself, and to take care of yourself. You learn to encourage and be kind to yourself. You can learn to listen to not only the black dog, but the rest of you that is still there underneath the dog.

Owning a black dog can also teach you to be more compassionate towards others - to recognise others who might own black dogs. Maybe, one day, you might be able to help them learn how to live with their own black dogs.