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# The Problem of Loving Pets With Behavior Issues

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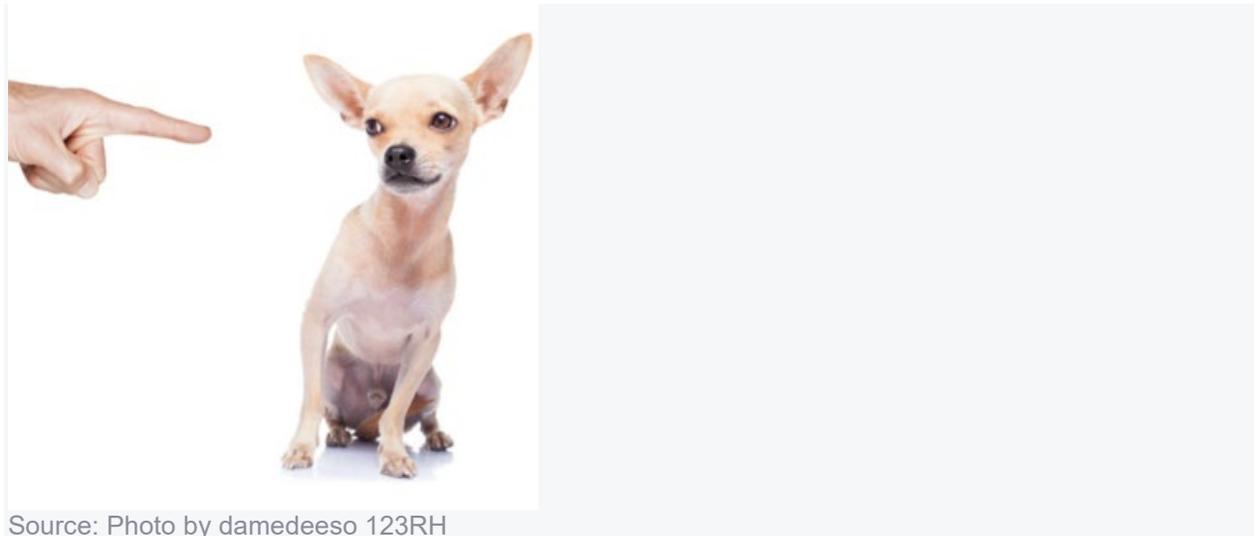
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# The Problem of Loving Pets With Behavior Issues

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Loving pets with behavior problems can be a heavy psychological burden.



Source: Photo by damedeeso 123RH

When people adopt a puppy, they assume their new furbaby is going to bring joy to their lives. Usually, this is the case—but there are exceptions. Take Sarah and Ian Coe, a married couple I interviewed for [a book I wrote](#) on human-animal relationships. Their lives were going along just fine until they adopted a nine-week-old Shiba Inu puppy named Hiro.

While he was adorable, Hiro was a handful from the get-go. Unless he got constant [attention](#), he would shriek inconsolably, and he was unmanageable unless they exercised him for a couple of hours a day. Hiro's bad behavior, and particularly his penchant for humping other dogs, got him banned from the local dog park. In desperation, Sarah and Ian consulted their veterinarian. She told them that they should get a second dog, that Hiro needed a playmate. Big mistake.

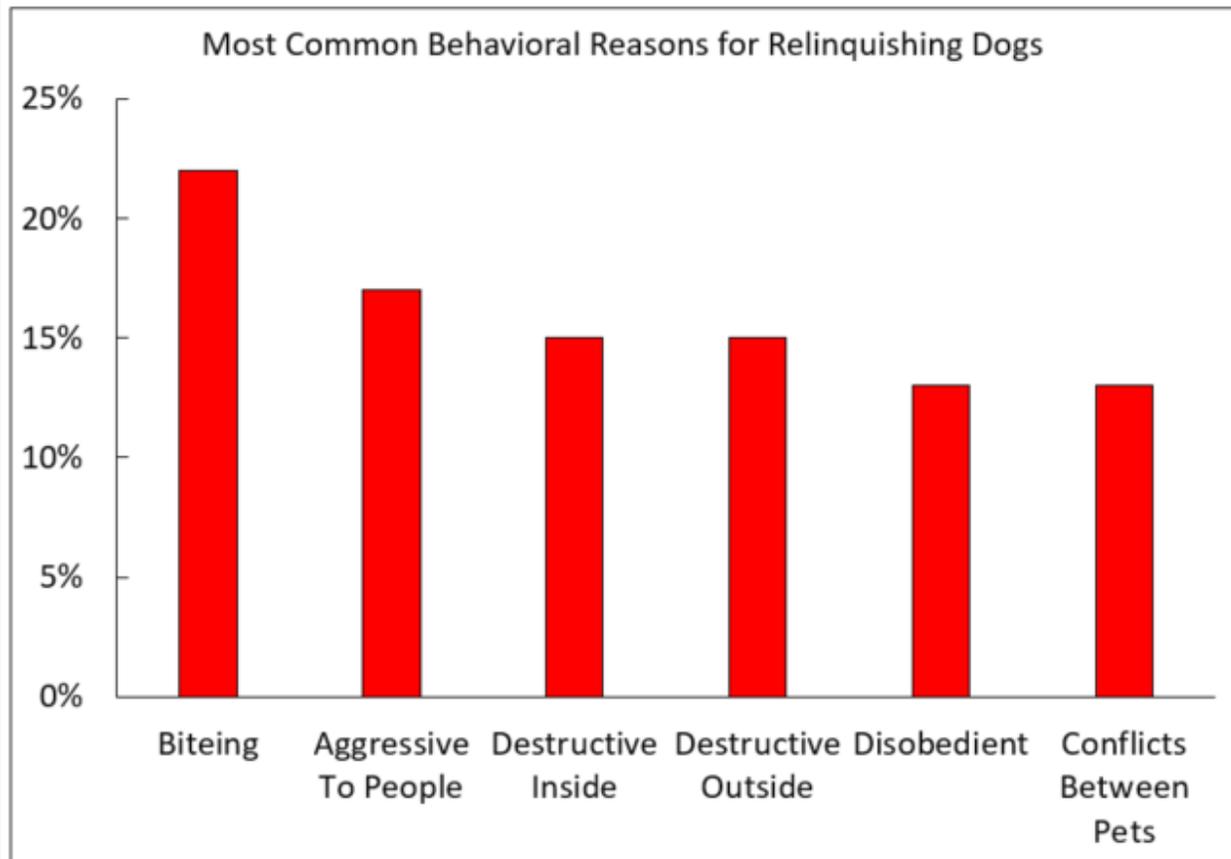
That's how they wound up with Nami, their new Shiba puppy. Unfortunately, she was even crazier than Hiro. Sarah described her as an unpredictable,

aggressive, and demanding [bully](#). In addition to the incessant barking, the two dogs chewed up the furniture, destroyed the rugs, and generally wreaked havoc on the Coe's once-tidy apartment. The couple quit having friends over for dinner because Hiro and Nami would growl at them and try to steal food from the table. Their [pets](#) had morphed into a pair of surly punks who were ruining their owners' lives.

## **Pet-Keeping and “The Caregiver Burden”**

There are hundreds of studies on the benefits of living with pets. But only recently have researchers examined the burdens of loving animals with serious problems. Nearly all of these studies have focused on pets with medical issues. For example, a research team headed by Dr. Mary Beth Spitznagel of Kent State University [found that](#) owners of dogs and cats with chronic or terminal diseases were much more likely than owners of healthy pets to suffer from [depression](#), psychological [stress](#), and [anxiety](#). And [Danish researchers reported](#) that the feelings of sadness, [guilt](#), and sense of loss that come with caring for chronically ill dogs are similar to the emotions experienced by caregivers of human loved ones.

Researchers have neglected situations like Sarah and Ian's in which behavior problems cause upheavals in the lives of pet owners, but it is an important issue. [Studies have found](#) that pet owners are more likely to relinquish their dogs to animal shelters for behavioral problems than for any other reason. (Troublesome behaviors are the second most common reason owners relinquish pet cats.)



Source: Graph by Hal Herzog

In a [recent article](#) in the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, Kristin Buller, a clinical social worker, and Dr. Kelly Ballantyne, a veterinary [behaviorist](#), reported the results of a qualitative study on the stresses that come with dealing with pets with behavior problems. Their findings shed light on this important aspect of the relationship between humans and companion animals.

## The Study

Through social media, the researchers recruited people who currently or previously cared for a pet with behavioral issues. Their respondents were 37 dog owners, one cat owner, and one person who owned a dog and a cat. The participants completed an online survey that included a series of open-ended questions related to how their pets affected their lives. These animals had a variety of behavior problems. They included barking, howling, destroying furniture, and urination and defecation when they were home alone. Some of the animals suffered from [fear](#), anxiety, and trembling. Others were aggressive; they would snap at or bite people or other animals. Buller and Ballentine found the responses of the owners reflected four central themes.

### The [Caretaking](#) Theme

Most of the owners wrote about the toll their pet's behaviors took on their day-to-lives. This included the time required for behavioral training, and in cases of aggressive dogs, the need for constant vigilance. Time demands meant that some owners were unable to leave their homes when they wanted. Then there was the money problem. As one wrote, *"Costs. It's expensive to go to the vet or hire behavior specialists. Time. Life is crazy and my time is stretched thin already."*

As with Sarah and Ian, pets ruined the social lives of some owners. They felt isolated because they could not have friends over. A few owners of dogs who suffered from [separation anxiety](#) felt they could not leave their pets alone. In other cases, owners lost friends due to conflicts stemming from their dogs' behaviors. One owner who had to relinquish her dog wrote, *"I really loved him despite all his issues, but he made it impossible for me to have a life and live with him."*

### The Emotion Theme

Many owners described their emotions related to their pet's bad behavior. Some described positive feelings. (*"Our overall bond is much stronger as we are working to fix the issues together..."*) Most of the respondents, however, focused on negative emotions. As one person wrote, *"Every time he behaves aggressively, I have a very strong reaction which includes sadness, frustration, and [embarrassment](#). I always have to choose my path carefully when I am with him. I have to be constantly vigilant of things that might upset him and cause him to react."*

Some owners expressed a confluence of mixed emotions. One woman, for example, felt fear that her dog would bite someone, sadness that her dog would never experience a normal life, and frustration when her best efforts at training failed. Another wrote, *“We have had many dogs through the years, and I never knew it was possible to have a dog like this. I don’t think I will ever get another dog again.”*

For some of the owners, the possibility of euthanasia was the gorilla in the room. One participant expressed this directly: *“While euthanasia has been taken off the table for time being, it’s still a thought looming in the back of my mind, which is beyond painful.”*

## **The Coping Theme**

In the third theme that emerged in the study, respondents described the strategies they used to cope with living with difficult pets. One of these was acceptance. This was exemplified by an owner who wrote, *“His reactivity and barking are part of who he is... We learn to manage it and in the meantime think he is the smartest and best and handsomest dog in the world.”* For another, coping strategies included *“Talking, breathing, and remembering that we don’t give a crap about what others think...”*

Among the most important coping mechanisms involved connecting with a support group or a veterinary behaviorist or professional dog trainer. As one said, *“Every time I get upset with the stress of owning a dog like him my trainer reminds me of all the reasons why my dog is cool. He always focuses on the positive side, which is what I need to hear sometimes.”*

## **The Lack of Understanding and Support Theme**

Some owners talked about their lack of understanding and knowledge, for example, not knowing where to go for help or where to get information dealing with their pet’s behaviors. In other cases, they described their frustration with friends. As one person put it, *“I think the biggest thing is people who don’t understand how severe a pet’s behavior problems can be. They may not understand the stress, the money involved, the restrictions, etc. And it is hard to explain to someone who has no idea what you are dealing with or what your pet is dealing with.”* One was upset when her friends would say things like, *“Just get rid of it. The dog is broken.”*

Some owners felt that other people blamed them for their pets' problems. Sadly, these judgments came not just from friends and strangers, but also professional dog trainers and veterinarians.

## Sometimes Things Go Really Wrong

When I asked Sarah and Ian if the stress of living with two out-of-control dogs was affecting their relationship, there was a long pause. They looked at each other and quietly told me they had started seeing a [marriage](#) counselor. A couple of months later, Sarah emailed me. She and Ian were filing for [divorce](#).

### References

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