Chapter 1

Is My Dog Highly Sensitive?

High sensitivity is not something we should fear. It isn't a disability or an illness—nor is it necessarily caused by trauma. High sensitivity is an innate temperament trait that evolved to increase the survival chances of an individual and their family or social group. However, when the environment fails to honor the strengths and vulnerabilities that come with a highly sensitive brain—or when the highly sensitive individual struggles to regulate their emotions, thoughts, and sensory experiences—this trait can complicate one's mental health and relationships.

Right now, it's impossible to describe any dog as highly sensitive with absolute certainty, as this trait largely situates in the brain's neurological activity, specifically in the way information is processed. This makes it challenging to visualize or measure, which is why the existence of the trait in humans can still be met with skepticism to this day. Even more complicated is the idea of high sensitivity in non-human animals. A collection of

behavioral patterns and temperament traits may suggest its existence, along with growing brain imaging research, but labeling a non-human animal as highly sensitive implicitly invokes the assumption that the animal is capable of experiencing complex emotions. That idea doesn't sit well with everyone. The discussion of whether a dog can be labeled as highly sensitive often tends to distract from the needs he may be trying to communicate through his behavior. So let's agree, from the start, not to get too caught up in the discussion that surrounds high sensitivity. Instead, let's simply explore what it might mean for the dogs who share our homes.

I've learned not to narrow my focus too much by marking someone with one specific label. These can be useful to make sense out of patterns of behavior that might be worrying to ourselves or to our environment. A particular set of patterns can be filed under a specific name. This label can then be an invitation to become more aware of our personal experiences and the way we relate to the world inside and around us.

Too firm a grip on labels, however, can limit our growth to expectations that fit the criteria. Picture it as a house plant that has been crammed in a tiny flowerpot. In time, three things can happen. A first possibility is that the plant's roots eventually break the pot, forcing the caretaker to move it to a more fitting one (or plant it outdoors where it can rise to its full potential). Second, the plant can cease to grow and take on a dull color instead. Third, the plant resigns any attempt at growth

and eventually dies. I would argue that most dogs who are labeled as problematic are making desperate attempts to break their pot and stretch their roots. The question we'll ask ourselves here, is whether we are ready to make room for their growth, or will we stick to our own conditioned attempts to contain them?

While the use of labels can contribute to one's emotional growth, they can never fully define someone. They can help draw a map of personal traits and patterns of behavior shaped by an individual's inherent biology and life experiences, but shouldn't be used as flowerpots that force one's roots to remain stunted and wanting. Instead, the use of a label can be part of the wind, the rain, sunlight, and earth that gently guide someone's growth into a clear space in the forest, where one can reach the water and light needed to thrive.

As we are all in a continuous state of development, it is helpful to notice the emotions, thoughts, and behavior patterns of an individual in a certain time and place. A label can help you navigate that development but is not a destination. Keep that in mind when you're feeling overwhelmed by past experiences, current struggles and hopes for the future. There is always the present moment to assess, and go from there.

So, when we suspect that a dog is highly sensitive, it is probably because he presents us with a set of characteristics and patterns of behavior that point to a highly sensitive brain. In that case, we can safely go

ahead and offer him a more fitting metaphorical flowerpot. We can adjust the energy of his relationships, his home environment, and lifestyle according to his needs. The energy spent debating the existence of high sensitivity in non-human animals could be more effectively used by observing the needs of the dog as a unique individual and improving the quality of life for him and his family. Today.

To assess if your dog might be highly sensitive, you can check the statements below that apply to your dog. The more checkboxes you mark, the higher the likelihood that your dog is indeed highly sensitive.

- My dog seems to notice the smallest details and changes in his environment.
- My dog's behavior is strongly influenced by my own mood.
- My dog reacts relatively strongly to touch and/or physical pain.
- My dog regularly withdraws to be alone or to rest undisturbed.
- My dog reacts relatively strongly to changes in food, both in behavior (e.g., sniffing new food longer than average) and physically (prone to diarrhea).

- My dog quickly behaves nervously when there's lots of noise.
- My dog often suffers stress-related health problems, such as gastrointestinal sensitivity, ear infections, eye infections, or other types of infection.
- My dog prefers or avoids a specific type of leash or harness (e.g., withdraws when you attempt to move a lead or harness over his head, standing awkwardly when wearing a new harness…).
- My dog often seems to "overreact": he has intense emotional responses to seemingly average stimuli.
- My dog startles easily, e.g., at sudden sounds.
- My dog tends to become hyperactive when involved in prolonged activities, e.g., playtime at the dog park, or a children's party at home.
- My dog seems to have a short attention span.
- My dog is easily overstimulated.
- My dog makes obvious efforts to gain my approval.
- My dog avoids rough play with multiple dogs but can engage in enjoyable play with one other dog.

- My dog is often wary about new things, like garbage cans that appeared on the sidewalks of his daily route.
- My dog takes his time to carefully investigate new objects, scents, sounds, tastes, etc.
- My dog becomes nervous when his daily routine is disrupted.
- My dog appears to be sensitive to specific smells or sounds, e.g., profusely sneezing when in proximity to cigarette smoke, or standing still during a walk to take in the scents carried by the wind.
- When given the chance, my dog tries to avoid busy or noisy situations.
- When in busy situations (traffic, noise, many people and/or dogs are present) where he cannot move away from, my dog reacts extremely excited (e.g., by barking loudly, forcing attention on people, stealing and chewing on items…).
- Once my dog becomes excited, it's difficult to calm him.
- My dog seems to be on high alert constantly.

How a dog behaves is the current sum of his genetics and life experiences. His personality and behavior are the outcome of a complex combination of biology and psychology. Compared to humans, all dogs are inherently sensitive due to their heightened sensory experiences, especially their hearing and sense of smell. Dogs often react more strongly to stimuli that you might not perceive as intense.

Because the dog for which you are reading this book lives in our busy, noisy environment every single day, he will probably be more sensitive to overstimulation than you. This book can be useful in nurturing your dog's mental health while navigating our human-dominated society.

If you recognize your dog in twelve or more of these characteristics, you might want to get comfortable here, because there's a good chance your dog is highly sensitive.

There are two ends to every leash. To help you discover whether you're approaching your dog from an idealized perspective that leaves little room for individuality, I suggest reflecting on the following questions. I've provided space for you to formulate your thoughts as writing a few words or sentences can help you gain more insight into your own tangle of thoughts and feelings. Remember that no one needs to read this. This is your copy of this book. It's a space where you can allow your

words to arise as they are. No right or wrong, no judgment.

(Unless, of course, you borrowed this book. In that case I hope you'll take a moment to find yourself a notebook. You might need one in future chapters, too.)

How do you experience your dog's fearful, reactive or restless behavior?

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Which emotions arise within yourself at the thought of this behavior? (Don't think about this one too deeply. The emotions are there. Can you name them?)

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How do you usually respond to these emotions? In other words: how do they alter your behavior?

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Picture your idea of a perfect dog. What does he look like? How does he behave?

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Are there similarities to the dog you live with?

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Do you believe your dog inherently matches this image?

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Now picture your ideal human partner. Describe him, her, or them.

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How does this person behave generally?

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If you have a partner, does this person resemble this image?

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Do you believe your partner inherently matches this image?

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How does that influence the way you love this person?

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How is an ideal partner presented on your most watched media platforms?

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Can you spot similarities with your own idea of what and how a partner should be like?

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How are "well-behaved" dogs pictured on your preferred media platforms?

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Do you notice similarities with the dog of your dreams?

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Take a moment and allow your thoughts to settle. The following part will still be here whenever you're ready.

As was the custom, I had a party for my seventh birthday. While the kids were gathered in the living room, my older sister was upstairs in her room. She happened to be looking out of the window when one of our little guests ran out crying. My sister rushed downstairs, ran out barefooted, and caught up with the girl. When asked where on earth she thought she was going, the girl replied that I had told her to leave.

I remember that day, especially that moment of being surrounded by a dozen children who seemed to be yelling and bickering all at once. It felt like I was fighting the pull of an approaching hurricane, and that girl had the misfortune of bumping into me right in that moment. I pushed her back, looked her straight in the eye and told her to leave. I remember her face changing, realizing what I'd done, and her storming out the front door.

This was 1991, when there was no talk of traits like high sensitivity. My strong emotional response to something so seemingly small was a result of feeling overstimulated. As my psychological state was largely

misunderstood, I was simply viewed—in that moment—as unnecessarily cruel.

You may wonder why I share personal experiences in a book that is supposed to be about dogs. In the preface I wrote about always remaining stuck inside our human perspective whenever we look at other animals. Yet, when we look deeply at regions of our brains where our emotions are processed, we find many similarities.

Think of a young dog named Buster in group class. He starts losing interest in today's obedience class, has trouble concentrating, and starts whimpering, barking, and tugging his leash. Now imagine another person or dog accidentally bumping into him. Buster lashes out and nips his opponent. It happens fast. It seemed like he didn't even growl. Nobody saw it coming. He is corrected by a tug at the leash, an angry word from his embarrassed caregiver, and is forced to remain in that tense situation until class is over.

If we understand that Buster feels overstimulated, we can grasp that he is feeling highly emotional. The more emotional we become, the less clearly we can think to make smart decisions. Instead, we feel the growing need to regulate our emotions so they might soften and our body can return to a natural balanced state. We try to flee the situation. We can't. We're stuck. Our emotions rise. We lash out.

I wasn't a cruel kid. I was overstimulated and in need of a break. Buster isn't aggressive or disobedient,

nor does he gain anything by being punished in that moment. An overly emotional brain isn't open to learning. Instead, it is trying to cope. Buster probably feels overstimulated and needs a break to cool down. Only when his brain has been able to process its emotions, will Buster be open to learn how to make smart decisions again. Group class might also not be Buster's ideal learning environment. He may need a calmer, less intense and more predictable environment to steady his focus.

As a child, I spent a lot of time watching the cats we lived with. I mostly remember that peaceful feeling of them lying in the grass, their noses moving with a passing breeze. I don't remember feeling lonely, though I mostly played with my Barbie dolls by myself, went on imaginary adventures by myself, or laughed with my imaginary friend. (Yup.) Sometimes, I'd go play at a friend's house. Sometimes, a friend would come play at my house, and we would spend that time mostly outside. We'd go ride our bikes or build a camp in the woods. Simple. No crowds. No loud music. No tight schedule. Just a couple of 1980s kids showing off their BMX bikes.

One day, my mother picked me up from a school trip. She watched the bus roll into the school's parking lot and caught a glimpse of her daughter by the window, sitting by herself while the other kids had paired up. I smiled and waved. Her heart broke. She assumed I was an outsider, which in our society is often interpreted as a

cause for worry. She didn't know that I had chosen to sit by myself so I could look out the window at the cows and horses we passed by. Even so, in a well-intentioned effort to find me some friends, I was enrolled in a local youth movement and a sports club. To this day, the distinct smell of tents or the sound of sneakers squeaking on a gym floor makes my stomach turn.

Gradually and over the years, expectations about social behavior faded and I was accepted as the odd child who preferred writing stories instead of running around with a gang of screaming children. It was around that time that I began to discover my strengths and vulnerabilities. To my sweet mother's relief, I did enjoy the company of friends, but mostly with a select group of familiars within a creative setting. I eventually starred in a homemade parody of *Twin Peaks* as *"Ineke Peaks"* in a series of videos we made with kids from the neighborhood. That was so much more fun than sharing a dorm with fifty other kids, or rubbing my bruised volleyball-arms.

I enjoyed time with friends as long as I found the time and space to process all sensory information, thoughts and emotions that washed over me. When out on our bikes, I was free to stop and linger whenever I needed. When making our home videos, my mind focused on the creative process that was deeply regulating in itself, and no one forced me to return to the group when I wandered off here and there, taking a break from the company.

In my own way, step by step and day by day, I experienced how to find joy in social activities. And so, at my own pace, I was able to stretch my branches and grow.

Imagine what Buster could do if he was allowed the space to process and grow at his own pace.

About twenty years later, I lived with Maya, our dear friend who had recently been adopted from a dog shelter by Peter, who would become my husband. Maya had the dark face of a young German Shepherd Dog and her nose bore a scar from a dog bite.

At that time, we lived in an apartment in a neighborhood where someone was always taking out the trash or teaching a kid to ride a bike—where there always seemed to be at least one cat crossing the street, or an elderly lady walking a barky Maltese.

Whenever we went out, Maya pulled the leash so hard she could barely breathe. Her tongue dropped out of her mouth and had a permanent cherry-red hue. It was often covered with white foam. Her eyes were wide open and her pupils dilated, causing her otherwise soft brown eyes to seem entirely black. She didn't respond when I tried to get her attention, and she wouldn't take treats. If she saw something move, anything at all, she lunged and barked at it. To make matters worse, she refused to urinate outside. We went out longer and more frequently because we didn't have a backyard. Only when we drove her outside of town, to a field or someplace where few

people or dogs came, would she go potty. I spent many evenings wearily browsing some remote place in my pajamas, hoping Maya would finally squat so we could all go home and get some sleep.

I had just graduated with honors as a dog obedience instructor—a two-year course that had focused mainly on classical conditioning as a foundation for parenting any dog. So now, I skimmed through my books but found nothing about dogs who refused to go potty. Local dog trainers told me that Maya's behavior didn't make any sense—one of them even insisted that Maya's behavior was abnormal, as all dogs want nothing more than to scent-mark—yet none of them offered me solid advice. In the meantime, we kept taking her for car rides out of town so she could pee, at times when we could really have used some downtime ourselves.

Peter didn't make such a fuss about it. He assumed that she felt too overwhelmed by the activity in our home environment and needed the space and quiet to relax enough to relieve herself. Back then, I had studied and read so much about dogs that I had gotten stuck in my thinking mind. I was so lost in my thoughts about *why* Maya behaved the way she did and *how* I could possibly *change* that behavior that I lost touch with what *felt* so obvious to Peter. I had no idea how right he was.

One pivotal day, I came home in tears after a group class with Maya. While the other dogs around us had performed flawless obedience tricks, Maya had just kept whining, barking, and pulling the leash. There were

at least six other classes going on around us. Dogs were jumping over poles, running through tunnels, and sitting obediently by their caregiver's leg. At one point, I had felt so desperate with her behavior that I had fled into the woods with Maya. There, she kept whining and pulling that leash, but at least the barking stopped. We stayed there until most of the dogs had left. Once I had gotten her in the car, I remember grabbing the steering wheel and waiting until the tears stopped blurring my vision.

"Listen," Peter said that evening when I stood in our hallway wiping my eyes, "I don't have a problem with Maya. Maya doesn't have a problem with Maya. You have a problem with Maya."

And suddenly, I had become my mother—the one who had enrolled her daughter in the youth movement and local sports club, with the good yet harmful intention of "helping" her daughter become more social.

After I learned to acknowledge Maya's behavior as a genuine expression of her emotions, I could identify and respect her boundaries. I faced my own irrational expectations and sent them away, like that girl at my birthday party.

Two years after that embarrassing group class—and without any formal obedience training—Maya enjoyed leisurely walks, no longer pulling on the leash. Once we had moved into our house with a private backyard, where she no longer felt her safety was compromised by the unpredictable presence of strangers,

she relieved herself healthily several times a day, peacefully and undisturbed. She continued to stroll contently and take her time to sniff all the scents I could not see, until her fine age of thirteen. She taught me that listening deeply to someone else's needs requires the humility to soften one's own voice.

Expectations can be treacherous. They project an image onto someone regardless of whether that individual can—or even wants to—meet that image. So long as the individual fails to meet these projected expectations, he'll sense disappointment from his environment. This can develop into feelings of despair and frustration, as acceptance is something all social species crave. This often leads the individual to seek approval, inadvertently taking on the challenge of meeting those external expectations. Along the way, the individual betrays himself, leaving his talents undiscovered and his boundaries blurred. This behavior fuels encouragement from the outside world. And so, both individual and environment run after each other in a vicious cycle of expectation and authenticity—the one never truly seeing the other.

I now invite you to identify your expectations about your dog.

It's okay. We've all had them.

Once you've gotten a hold of yours, walk them to the window. Go ahead. Open the window, reach out your hand, and stretch your fingers.

Allow your expectations to be carried off by the wind.

Now return to your dog and look at him. For the first time, truly look at him.

This is a marvelous being. It took the universe billions of years of evolution to arrive at the tiny chance that you and he would share this very life, this very space and time, and look each other in the eye. This is an individual with a complex emotional life, just like you. He may look different and his perception may differ from yours. External stimuli affect him differently from how they affect you, but the processing of those stimuli sets off complex hormonal and neurological processes. The results can be seen in his health, posture, and behavior.

Let's take our time and look at him more closely.

What do you say?