

After pulling into our driveway, Chris released Charlotte into our backyard. She zoomed around the yard, romping and rolling over and over in the soft grass, obviously relishing the taste of freedom.

But once we brought her inside, chaos ensued. It quickly became apparent that Charlotte had never been inside a house. She was panic-stricken. Dashing from windows to the door in our living room, she frantically looked for a way out. She'd spot a possible escape route and whimper to be let out. Oh boy, what had we gotten into?

I could only guess what the first four years of Charlotte's life were like. We couldn't even pick up the television remote or the telephone without her cringing. Any fast movement of our hands brought the same cowering response. She was bristling with fear.

To help overcome her wariness, we would pet her affectionately while handling any object. The grip of fear holding tightly to Charlotte slowly began to release.

Our hardwood floors became a major challenge for Charlotte after years in what was most likely a wire cage. She felt safe on carpet but acted as though she were on an ice-covered pond when she encountered the hardwood and our tiled kitchen floor. She'd freeze in place while digging her nails into the floor for a foothold. Then she'd desperately whimper like a heartbroken abandoned pup.

To solve that problem, we spread non-slip, cushiony, shelf-lining fabric on the floors throughout the house as a bridge to the carpeted areas.

We're not sure how much of that fear is psychological rather than a true physical problem, but it remains stubbornly intact. Eventually, we replaced the shelf liner with throw rugs. They form a permanent bridge for her. A long runner carpet in our kitchen leads to the back door. Now Charlotte leaps from rug to rug in delight when Chris asks, "Want to go outside?"

Adopting a rescue has been an ongoing learning experience. One early lesson learned was to take a rescue dog to the veterinarian as soon as possible. We had been assured by the shelter's staff that Charlotte was free of Lyme disease. She wasn't. It is possible that an infected tick bit her while she stayed in the outdoor wooded area of her foster home. (Charlotte was housed in Pennsylvania; Lyme's is rampant in that state.)

Our vet immediately prescribed a month of antibiotics. Charlotte occasionally needs another round after testing shows an increase in the Lyme's titer level. Because the disease was caught early in her, it can be controlled with medication.

Despite all of Charlotte's anxiety, what shines bright is a bottomless reservoir of love that is the hallmark of Labrador retrievers. Curiously, her apprehension is limited to inanimate objects, not people.

She quickly became the favorite of neighborhood children waiting for their school bus. During her walks, Charlotte carried a furry stuffed hedgehog toy we'd bought her as though it were her puppy, which was hysterical to the kids.



Although it was endearing to see Charlotte's reaction to the toy, it reminded me that she had probably never had a true puppyhood and didn't know what it meant to "play."

The language of dogs is endless in its gestures. Charlotte lets us know when walk time is over. She'll tug at her leash and point toward home. As her walks began growing shorter, we asked our vet to examine her. She was diagnosed with hip dysplasia. The vet advised us to give her enteric-coated aspirin when she is in obvious pain. (Please check with your vet before giving an animal any over-the-counter medication.) This tough little girl will not let discomfort stop her daily trots around her neighborhood, however short. Her circle of dog friends and children await her morning greeting.

Some of Charlotte's ongoing fears appear to be classic post-traumatic stress. With patience, our team of three manages her PTSD. Shortly after we adopted Charlotte, I read the book, *Saving Gracie: How One Dog Escaped the Shadowy World of American Puppy Mills*, by Carol Bradley. In her book, Bradley recounts the long road to recovery for dogs suffering through years in puppy mills. That book has helped us understand Charlotte when a new anxiety suddenly appears. Our best weapon is simply to be consistent in reassuring her that we will never allow harm to come her way. Trust is powerful.

Despite a rough start in life, Charlotte's innate gentleness remains untouched. The only time we have ever heard her growl was on the day a flock of wild turkeys strolled through our yard.

Whenever I feel down about Charlotte's earlier life, Chris reminds me that what matters most is how content she is now. We've come to know what great capacity dogs have to forgive their past, and the courage they possess to survive harsh conditions.

Patience on Charlotte's part and ours has resulted in a joyful life together. 🦷

