My Twice-Exceptional Murphy

The True Story of a Gifted Dog

Jennifer Ault

Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

Chapter 4

Enter Roxy

By the time Murphy was a year old, we had moved to a new home in a new state, and there I took a full-time job outside of the house. We had a tiny fenced-in yard, and I let Murphy out in the mornings, then took him on long walks through the neighborhood in the evenings. Even though there was a leash law, I regularly took him off the leash and walked the neighborhood paths with my hands in my pockets, with Murphy following close by my side. Not only was he extremely obedient to my voice commands, he was also exceptionally attached to me and preferred to stick beside me.

But Murphy wasn't very happy with our new setup. He became stressed that I left him alone all day. He began forcing his way past my legs out into the garage when I was trying to leave in the mornings, and he'd sit next to my car and cry until I could get him back into the house. It nearly broke my heart.

This went on for a week or so until one evening I came home from work to find all of the throw pillows and blankets from the couches and chairs piled in the middle of the living room.

"What's this?" I asked him.

He looked at me in shame, his head down, his ears limp.

"Buddy, I'm not mad. But I don't understand. What are you doing?"

Murphy cowered deeper. "I don't know. I'm sad."

"Oh kiddo," I soothed. "Mommy's so sorry. I have to go to work. I don't know what to do."

"I don't like being alone all day." He cringed.

I had known that this was a problem, but I didn't know how severe it was until he started acting out. After all, this was the dog who had never been disobedient in his life, who had never touched anything that wasn't his nor destroyed anything even it if was his. I felt miserable for him. I sighed and started picking up the pillows and blankets. There wasn't a puncture-hole in any of them. Leave it to Murphy to rebel against his circumstances without damaging a thing.

That night I knocked on the door of our next-door neighbor. "Helen," I said," I have a problem." And I explained to her our frustrating situation. Helen was a kind woman who had already showered Murphy with affection each time she had seen him. In fact, I had held a birthday party for Murphy

when he turned one, and the neighbors, including Helen, had come. We'd eaten bone-shaped cookies and other treats, and Helen had given Murphy a bundle of six new stuffed toys. Although she had no dogs of her own, she was clearly a dog lover. I appealed to her for help, and she readily agreed.

So beginning the next day, Helen came over each afternoon and let Murphy into the backyard, and she played with him and spent time with him. That helped, but it wasn't enough. Murphy still cried when I left each day. He was clearly exhibiting signs of separation anxiety. He needed someone to be with him all day, not just for the short time when Helen visited. He needed a companion.

I needed to get another dog.

We were living in Virginia then, and someone told me about a no-kill animal rescue shelter just over the border in West Virginia. The shelter had a website with photos and descriptions of the dogs on it, and so I started investigating which dogs might make a suitable sibling for my lonely little boy. There were several possible candidates. I wanted a

female dog so that there would be no chance of Murphy being dominated by a bigger, more aggressive male. I wanted a dog that was about the same age and size as Murphy so that they could play together and wear each other out. Murphy was a healthy, growing boy, and although he was still a gangly adolescent, he was approaching fifty pounds. (He would ultimately top out at about sixty-two pounds of tall, lean muscle.)

I loaded Murphy into the car, and we drove the hour or so to the shelter in West Virginia. But the dogs whose online profiles I had been interested in were largely disappointing. They were smaller than I expected. Or they snapped at Murphy. Or they ignored him completely. They were not good matches.

I monitored the rescue shelter's website for several weeks, checking for new dogs almost daily. Murphy was not improving. He was still sad, and he continued to pile up pillows and blankets in the middle of the living room when he was feeling particularly lonely. We traveled to West Virginia two more times to look at dogs. We were disappointed each time.

Finally, in desperation at the third visit, I walked the rows of cages to look for possible companions for Murphy. As a last resort, I asked about a dog that had been in the shelter on each of our previous visits. She was an underweight seven-month-old smooth collie with one shockingly clear blue eye. In fact, her eye was so light blue that it was unnerving.

The handlers got out the dog, whose name was Mandy, and led her into the playroom where Murphy waited. After a quick greeting, the two began to romp together. It was glorious! With a bit of prompting, they each got hold of one end of a rope and played tug-of-war with it. Mandy was sweet-tempered and immediately enthusiastic about having

a friend. I remember saying, “Oh, we really like her!” She was the one.

The shelter insisted on doing a home visit, so they arranged to bring Mandy to our house the following week. We waited with great anticipation. When the van pulled up, the handler got out our new girl, and she immediately peed submissively in the driveway. That, it turns out, was going to be our first challenge.

The first of several.

I didn’t like the name “Mandy,” and since the dog didn’t seem to respond to it anyway, I decided to change it. I remembered seeing a darling little puppy once with the name of Roxy. That dynamic, energetic name was far more appropriate for the dog that had entered our home. But Roxy didn’t know that name either, and so I spent a great deal of time and frustration trying to get her to understand that *she* was Roxy.

In addition, Roxy had never been worked with. At seven months old, she was a terribly thin, thirty-five-pound dog, which was much smaller than she should have been at that age but was still big enough to create some very big messes, especially since she wasn't housetrained. She didn't know how to sit or lie down on command, and she didn't understand the rules of walking on a leash. More disturbing, she seemed afraid to go through doorways. She would hold back and hesitate and then finally dash through them, tail tucked between her legs. I couldn't tell if she was exhibiting fear that was the result of negative early experiences with scary or painful things on the other sides of doors in her young life or if she simply had never been exposed to doorways before.

The biggest immediate problem was that Roxy was ravenous. She clearly had been underfed for a long time. Murphy was on free access to his food; he regulated what he ate and when. Some days he ate a little bit, some days a lot.

Sometimes he ate dinner when I ate dinner, and sometimes I would hear him eating in the kitchen at midnight. He did whatever it was that he knew he needed to do. And Roxy was messing it all up.

The first time Roxy came into our house, she found Murphy's food bowl and wolfed down everything in it. She ate so fast that she threw up.

So I had to regulate how much food I put out so that Roxy would eat a healthy amount. This meant mealtimes, and Murphy would have none of it. He refused to eat when I put his bowl down. He wanted to eat on his schedule, not mine or Roxy's.

"Murphy," I pleaded with him one day while I was in the kitchen, monitoring Roxy while she was eating, "why don't you eat now? I have to stand here and make sure your sister doesn't eat your food, so this would be a good time for you to eat it."

"I don't want it now." Murphy started walking out of the kitchen.

"Hey!" I yelled. "Stop. You gotta eat."

"Later." He kept walking.

"No, now! I can't stay in the kitchen all evening just in case you decide you want to eat something."

"But I'm not hungry now."

"I don't care. Eat!"

Murphy shuffled off without looking back. "No thanks."

Roxy noticed that my attention was directed elsewhere and took a sneaky step toward Murphy's bowl.

"*Aaaaatt!*" I hollered. "Stop right there, young lady!"

Roxy immediately returned to her bowl, feigning innocence.

"Silly girl," I chided her. "This is not your last meal. I promise!"

But Roxy didn't believe me. She had gone through some bad experiences in her first months of life, and she clearly bore emotional scars from them. She was afraid that there would come a day when there would not be enough food, and she was doing the best she could to gobble up enough to hold her through that next period of starvation. I felt sorry for her. She was so thin! I wondered about what terrible things had happened to her, but I also didn't want to know the awful truth because I knew it would make me sick to hear it. I didn't have any choice in the matter, however; Roxy's past was a mystery. I had to deal with her as she was, but I also had to make sure that Murphy got what he needed as well. He seemed deliberately to reject eating on Roxy's schedule. He absolutely refused to eat when she did. It was another act of rebellion on his part, only this time he was rebelling against being told what to do. He didn't like it that his freedoms were suddenly being restricted, and I couldn't blame him for that. I had to brainstorm a way to fix the situation.

I devised a plan that was surprisingly effective. With Helen's help, we fed Roxy a quarter-cup of food every two hours all day every day. The first few days, Roxy gulped down what was in her bowl almost without tasting it. But after a while, the idea of a mealtime became less and less novel, and finally, after little more than a week, Roxy left some food in her bowl. On that day, I cheered inwardly. Victory! She didn't have to eat it all; she finally understood that there would indeed be another meal after that one.

After that I filled both of the dog bowls with food and left them out. The dogs had free access to their food and self-regulated their diet from then on. And Murphy finally started eating again. All he had wanted was to be allowed to do things on his own time, just like he'd been allowed to do before.

But a more important thing happened during those first few weeks: Murphy stopped crying at the door each morning. He stopped piling pillows on the living room floor. He ceased to exhibit all signs of his separation anxiety. When I returned home from work each day, he was calm and happy. Roxy was kept confined to a crate during that time because she was still not to be trusted in the house without supervision, but her presence alone was enough. Murphy had found what he had been missing: a friend.

I thought that was the end of his anxiety problems.

I was wrong.

Chapter 6

The Storm on the Horizon

As charmed a life as Murphy was leading, he was starting to exhibit a pervasive uneasiness, in addition to acting out other odd behaviors. It started when he was about five years old with thunderstorms.

Lots of dogs are afraid of thunderstorms, so I didn't think too much of it when Murphy started to let on that he was fearful of the changing weather. He had always followed me around from room to room, but I began noticing that

I was tripping on him repeatedly prior to the onset of a thunderstorm. He could feel the electricity in the air, or sense the barometric pressure dropping, or hear the distant rumble of thunder—all before I had any idea that a weather event was brewing.

One day I came home from work to find the shower curtain moved aside. Like Murphy, I am a bit of a perfectionist, so I knew that I had not left it that way. I was startled and investigated the house, certain that someone had been there. But no one was, and the dogs were happy to see me, smiling and wagging as though nothing was wrong. It was a mystery.

This happened on several occasions. One day I came back from my usual four-mile run, this time with the sky darkening above me, threatening to soak me before I returned to the safety of my house, to find, once again, the shower curtain moved. This time, however, only Roxy greeted me at the door.

"Where's your brother?" I asked her, walking from room to room, looking for him.

Roxy followed me around the house, waiting for me to discover the surprise. She knew that her brother had started becoming quirky when storm clouds gathered.

I don't know why I didn't think to look behind the shower curtain until I had checked every other room, but when I did, I found Murphy lying in the bathtub. He had pushed aside the shower curtain and climbed in.

"What are you doing, buddy?" I asked him, perplexed.

Murphy looked up at me with innocent eyes, stood up, and stepped calmly out of the bathtub.

I watched him. "Why were you in the bathtub? Is it the weather?"

Murphy shrugged and watched me pull the shower curtain back shut. “It felt safe.”

Here’s the really interesting part of this story: Murphy was right. The bathtub was by far the safest place in the entire house. There was no basement, and the bathroom was in the center of the home, with no windows and a fire wall on one side. Did Murphy know that? Or did he just feel safer in the close confines of the bathtub? I do not know.

Meanwhile, Roxy was oblivious to whatever it was that had Murphy so frightened. Thundershower? She couldn’t have cared less. Lightning crashing over her? No worries. Thunder rattling the windows? No big deal. This was a problem that clearly only afflicted Murphy.

But as I said, many dogs are afraid of thunderstorms, so I didn't think too much of the new fear that I saw growing in my little boy…until it grew bigger. Much bigger.

It wasn't long before Murphy's fear of thunderstorms grew into fears of things that resembled thunderstorms. Loud noises bothered him. He would duck for cover and tremble at the sound of a gunshot or a car backfiring. A door slamming shut would send him scurrying to the bathtub. His fears mounted.

One lovely summer day I was working at my desk with Murphy camped by my chair, as usual for him, when suddenly he stood up and began panting.

"What's wrong, Murpho?" I fondled his crooked ears.

Murphy tried to push past my legs and force himself into the space under my desk.

"Hey!" I said to him. "What are you doing? There's not enough room for you! If you accidentally turn off the power strip down there, I'll be ticked."

Murphy acted as though he hadn't heard a word. He kept shoving his shoulders against my chair and my desk until I rolled away so that he could curl up at my feet. He was in a small space barely large enough for him.

"Did you SEE that?!" he panted in alarm.

"See what?"

"The door MOVED!" He shut his eyes in terror.

"What?"

"It MOVED."

"You mean when the breeze blew in?" I asked, surprised. "It was the wind, bud. Just the wind." But nothing I could

do reassured Murphy. He trembled violently beneath my desk.

"Are you serious? The breeze? That's it?" I asked.

He cowered in fear before me.

"Oh, honey," I soothed. "No, it's okay!" But Murphy would not—could not—believe me. Something inexplicably terrifying had happened, and I didn't have the words to help him explain it away.

The list of scary things grew relentlessly. It worried me that Murphy was becoming so frightened of so many seemingly mundane things, and I wasn't sure what to do to make him more comfortable. I got conflicting advice, too. Some people said to soothe him to assure him that he was safe and that nothing bad was happening to him. Other people said that doing that was, in effect, rewarding his fear, thus setting him up to experience it again. I tried both actively calming him and taking the tough love approach of scolding him for his panicked behaviors. Usually I just acted as though nothing was out of the ordinary. I talked to him casually in an even tone and went about my business in an unhurried way. I thought that if I pretended that nothing was wrong, he'd see that, indeed, nothing was wrong. After all, he took many of his cues from me.

No matter what I did, though, it didn't work. Murphy's terrors grew.

One day, as I was getting ready to leave for work, I called to the dogs. "Wanna go out?" This was the signal that ordinarily elicited a joyful response from both dogs as they ran to the sliding glass door to the back yard. But on that day, only Roxy ran for the door.

"Murph, come on!" I yelled. Murphy took one look at me and slunk off toward the bathroom.

"Hey!" I cried. "What's up? You gotta go out."

Murphy cringed behind the bathroom door. "Don't make me."

"Why not?" I was thoroughly confused. It was a sunny day, no wind, no threatening weather on the horizon. "What are you scared of?"

"I don't know. Everything. It's not safe out there."

"But Murph!" I was stumped. "You have to go out."

Murphy wouldn't look at me. "Huh-uh. I can't."

I went into the kitchen and let Roxy out. Then I walked back to the bathroom. "Kiddo, you have to go out. I have to go to work, and you have to pee first so you won't have to go while I'm gone."

Murphy refused to budge. "I can hold it."

"No, this will not do," I insisted. I went into the bathroom and hoisted him to his feet. He planted them against the floor. "You have to go!" I was firm with him. I clasped my hands beneath his belly and, straddling him, forced him to walk to the back door. "Now go!" I told him in a firm voice, and I pointed to the yard. "Go potty."

Murphy looked around himself frantically, fear in his eyes. Finally he crouched just one step off the patio and peed a tiny little bit, then ran back to the door. "Let me in!" he cried.

I did, and he trotted back to the safety of the bathroom.

What was this all about? Roxy was sniffing at something under the pine trees that marked the property line at the back of the yard, completely unaffected by whatever was terrorizing Murphy. "Hey, Rox," I called, "time to go in."

Roxy obediently complied, and I gathered my things for work. I checked on Murphy once more before I headed out the door. He was lying behind the bathroom door, and he glanced up at me guiltily. He had gone out into the field for our typical morning walk as though nothing had been wrong. But this? This was not good.

It wasn't long before Murphy was exhibiting full-blown agoraphobia. He couldn't leave the house because he was so scared of what might be outside. I had to belly-walk him to the door every time I needed him to go out. And if it was raining, there was virtually no chance that he would go potty outside, even if I forced him out and made him stay there until he got his business done.

"Go already!" I'd yell as we both got wetter and wetter. "You could have gone five times by now! Just go!"

But he couldn't. He was too afraid.

Chapter 8

A Sharp Descent

As Murphy descended more and more into his own strange and terrifying world, our walks in the fields became more difficult. I started taking a leash with me—something I had never done before—so that if something startled Murphy and he chose to turn tail and run back for the house, I could try to catch him and drag him along on the path until he got over whatever had frightened him and was comfortable enough to continue walking on his own. He was a big dog, and even if he didn't need to worry about his weight, he needed exercise to stay healthy. But on days when he turned around and headed back to the house before I noticed the problem, he would not let me catch him. Instead, I'd find him in the garage when Roxy and I returned, huddled by the door, happy that his mom and his sister had managed to escape the dangers of the world that he had so wisely scuttled away from.

Sometimes I could use Murphy's brain against him. If I saw him stop in his tracks and dart off back toward the house, I would shout out, "Wait! Murphy, look!" and then I'd tromp to the edge of the woods and find a stick hung up in a tree somewhere. I'd struggle with it more than necessary (this was especially effective when it was snowy so that snow could cascade down around me while I pulled on the stick) and then purposely break part of it off so that it made a satisfying noise. "Will you look at this?!" I'd exclaim, feigned excitement in my voice. On truly bad days, that

tactic didn't work, but on days that weren't so bad, Murphy could let his curiosity get the better of him.

"What is it, Mom?"

"It's a stick! And it was stuck up in that tree!" I'd enthuse.

Murphy was a little disappointed. "That's all?"

"Yes. But look at what a good stick it is?!" I would break the stick into a nice piece for chewing on and hand it to him.

"It is a good stick…," he would concede, taking it in his mouth.

"Oh, and look at this one!" And again I'd pull a stick out of a tree somewhere, hoping that my false excitement wasn't evident in my voice and that Murphy was moving past his initial fright. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't. It took a great deal of energy on my part to try to convince Murphy of what Roxy needed no proof to see: that the world was a fascinating place—more interesting than frightening—and that it was so much more fun not being scared.

On his worst days, I wanted desperately to be able to talk with Murphy. I wanted him to tell me what he was feeling, what he was thinking, what was making him afraid. I wanted to be able to explain to him that the things he was afraid of were harmless. But as his fearfulness settled in to become a part of who he was, I came to understand that even if he'd had the words, Murphy could not have justified his fears to me—could not have given them a rational context or a logical basis. I, in turn, could not have explained them away for him. They were irrational, illogical, unreasonable. There was no language in which they made sense.

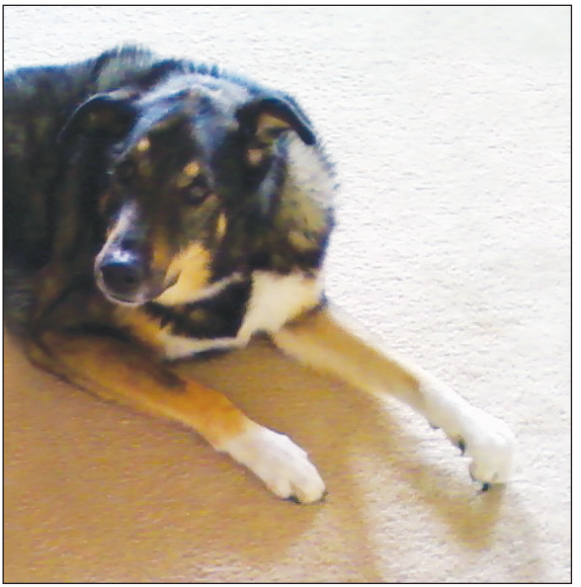
There was a sharp contrast emerging between how each of the dogs was developing as time went on. Roxy had begun

life in difficult circumstances, but in a warm and loving home, she had worked through her fears and her problems to become a healthy, happy dog. Murphy, on the other hand, had been given the best of everything as a puppy, had been loved and cared for, had never wanted for food or toys or a warm place to sleep, yet he was now exhibiting fear at a host of sounds and sights and situations. Had they switched puppyhoods, I might have understood. Roxy would have been forgiven, given her ugly past, for being fearful at things that might have harmed her. Murphy by all accounts should have been utterly carefree. And yet they were reversed. Her mental and psychological improvement was a lovely gift; his decline into fear, paranoia, and neuroticism was quite the opposite.

Chapter 9

Reaching Out for Help

As the days went on, I struggled more and more with Murphy. Most of the time he exhibited outright fear, often at things I could not see nor hear. Even on good days, he demonstrated a chronic low level of anxiety. I noticed that he began digging his front claws into the carpet while he was lying down. It was as though he was hanging on to the world so that it wouldn't throw him off. My friend Stu remarked that it was probably raining somewhere in the world, and Murphy knew it.



Was I doing something wrong? Had I somehow caused this problem in my beloved little boy? But Roxy was just fine. How could I have made him fearful but not her? They were living all of the same experiences together. If it was something I had done, shouldn't they both have been affected?

Roxy was like a typical dog, as far as I could tell, with typical dog fears. She was afraid of the vacuum cleaner and the lawn mower, and she didn't like heights. But strangely enough, for all of his irrational fears, Murphy was not afraid of those things. He didn't mind heights at all. And he followed me around each time I vacuumed the house, only jumping if the vacuum cleaner actually bumped into his feet. His favorite game while I mowed was to place a stick in front of the push mower so that I would have to stop, grab it, and toss it out of the way to continue mowing. He'd chase after the stick and return it to me, walking right up to the front of the mower and dropping it. How could he be so unafraid of the things that most dogs are scared of but so terrified of everything else? It was a mystery to me.

Ultimately I realized that Murphy was losing too much weight. He trembled violently much of the time, his teeth chattering in fright, and he stopped eating almost completely. He had always been thin, but his ribs began to show. I made him an appointment with a local veterinarian whom I had been told was good with behavioral issues.

The appointment started off badly. The veterinarian—let's call her Dr. Nohelp—insisted on Murphy being placed on an examination table. That would not normally have been a problem, but her exam tables were stainless steel slabs that lowered to the floor electronically. She lowered the table for Murphy and then had me set him on it.

"I can pick him up and put him on the table at full height," I told her. But she ignored me and pressed the button to raise the table. I thought Murphy was going to go into hysterics. He frantically fought to get off the table that was moving so alarmingly underneath him, scrambling against the smooth surface. He fell heavily on the floor, face first, as the table rose. After that, he wanted no part of the table, even when I tried to put him on it at its top height. But the doctor insisted, and Murphy struggled and fought with me while the vet did her initial exam.

"I don't think the problem is physical," I told her through clenched teeth while Murphy flailed against me. I was sweating trying to hold him in place.

Dr. Nohelp finished her examination and finally allowed me to set Murphy back down on the floor. Then she listened as I told her about Murphy's behaviors.

"Do you pick up his food and put it back in his bowl after he pushes it onto the floor?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I replied. "Usually."

"Good," Dr. Nohelp answered. "Do you allow him into the bathroom with you?"

"Uh…," I hesitated. I wasn't sure where this question was leading us. "I actually live by myself, so I don't have much need to close the bathroom door. Murphy follows me all over the place. I can't go from one room to the next without him by my side. He's my little shadow." I rubbed Murphy's crooked ears.

Dr. Nohelp harrumphed. "I *always* let my dogs go into the bathroom with me," she said.

"Umm…okay," I said. "I'm not sure that's our solution. There's much more going on here." And again I tried to explain to her how terrified Murphy was on a typical day. I

asked her, "Is there perhaps some medication we can try to see if he can calm down a bit?"

"You need to help him with other things instead," Dr. Nohelp replied curtly. "He needs to be allowed into the bathroom with you. He needs to go wherever you go."

"I don't think that's it," I protested.

"Well," she sniffed, "if you don't want to help your dog…."

"I *do* want to help him," I objected. "That's why I'm here. But what you're saying doesn't seem to be much of a solution."

But it was no use. The conversation had nowhere to go. I gave up and left.

And Murphy continued to decline. I finally took him to an animal behaviorist at my regular veterinarian's office. I hadn't even known that she was a specialist in cases like Murphy's.

This visit started off much better than our last had. Dr. Burkhart was warm and friendly, and I liked her immediately. I explained to her the scope of Murphy's problems—how his fears had grown and taken over his life. She asked questions about his eating and his fear responses, and she asked me about Roxy as well. Finally she turned to Murphy.

"I'm concerned about this muscle wasting," she said, feeling the bones protruding from his hips and back. "How long has he been like this?"

"Several months," I replied, feeling guilty that I hadn't sought her advice sooner.

"How often does this affect him? How many days per week would you say he's too afraid to walk? One or two?"

"Oh, no," I responded. "It's more like five."

"Five!" she gasped. "This is not a happy dog."

"No. And he's weird, too."

She looked at me levelly. "Weird how?"

"He has OCD-like behaviors. He's had them for years. I just never thought much of it."

That was a good clue for the vet. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder is diagnosed in people who feel compelled to act in ways that don't make much sense, but those behaviors help to relieve the anxiety they experience. For example, they might need to count the number of times they perform certain actions, or they may need to touch something with both their left hand and their right hand so that they don't feel uneven. They typically have rigid rules for their behaviors, and those rules are set up to allow them to prevent or avoid certain situations. The problem is that the rules have no bearing on whether the situations will occur in real life. This is what Murphy was doing when he touched objects upon entering a room or when he was performing his strange food rituals. They were behaviors that made no sense to anyone watching them, but they were not to be ignored to the person exhibiting them.

According to experts, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder doesn't occur very often among people with impaired intelligence. In fact, the very nature of the disorder arises from the idea that it is a key aspect of high intelligence. And that's just what Dr. Burkhart said to me.

"I tend to find this in the smarter breeds," she explained. "German shepherds are generally very smart, and Murphy is obviously mostly shepherd. You say he's smart?"

I was quick to answer: "Definitely."

"So what OCD behaviors does he exhibit?"

I told her that for years Murphy had been doing strange things around the house. I described the vase-touching and the eating mannerisms, as well as some other behaviors that suddenly struck me as unusual.

"He has always preferred soft toys like stuffed animals," I explained, "but now he holds them down and chews multiple little creases into the fabric of them, almost the way one would eat an ear of corn."

"That's an outlet for his anxiety," Dr. Burkhart said. "He's finding ways to relieve his tension."

"Oh, you know where else he does that?" I asked her. "On Roxy's face."

Dr. Burkhart wasn't sure she had heard me right. "Excuse me?"

"He chews off Roxy's whiskers," I explained.

In a fabulous twist of timing, I was able to show her.

I always took Roxy and Murphy to the vet together, even if the appointment was only for one of them, primarily because Murphy hated to be left alone. So while the doctor and I talked, Murphy and Roxy were getting comfortable wandering around the exam room. Not a minute after I told the vet about Murphy's quirkiest behavior, he did it right in front of her. He went over to Roxy and started chewing off the whiskers on her face.

The vet was transfixed. "I have never seen that. Ever," she said. "I've never even heard of it."

"It certainly seems strange to me," I said, shaking my head.

Dr. Burkhart wanted to put Murphy on medication to try to lessen his symptoms. "He has a severe anxiety disorder," she explained to me. "I usually see this kind of thing in the super-smart dogs. It's like he's too smart—he's over-thinking life. He's figured out all the things there are in the world to be afraid of."

"Did I do something to make this happen?" I asked.

"No!" she answered. "No. This is a chemical imbalance in his brain. We need to put him on a drug that will rebalance him so that he feels happy again." So she prescribed Prozac for him. Murphy was finally getting real help.

About the Author

Jennifer Ault has been an editor of books about giftedness for nearly two decades. Through her work, she has read innumerable books by many of the greatest minds in the field of giftedness. Her knowledge on the topic is twofold; not only has she been indoctrinated in this way into the literature of gifted education and gifted parenting and teaching; she also was identified as a gifted student in school and grew up living with the very problems and rewards that those books have sought to address. She currently edits for Royal Fireworks Press, a job she finds intensely rewarding.

Murphy and Roxy were two of the greatest joys of Jen's life. After they passed, she got a tattoo of their pawprints in an array of forget-me-nots to memorialize them. The tattoo is on the front of her shoulder, close to her heart.