

HOW TO TREAT ANY BEHAVIOR PROBLEM NOW

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Introduction

Animal behavior problems can be complex and can require lengthy appointments for complete and detailed evaluation in order for an appropriate treatment plan to be developed. However, due to the limited number of behavior specialists available and the inability or unwillingness of some clients to spend money on specialty care, there will be many occasions when the general practitioner must be prepared to at least give some basic behavior instructions to a client. That lengthy appointment is not always necessary in order to help prevent suffering for the pet, injury to the client and ultimate relinquishment of the pet, as is often the case when behavior problems remain untreated.

Similar to the case where you are faced with a pet with a chronic skin condition where you believe referral to a dermatologist is necessary, you may refer and the client may choose to not make the appointment. In those cases, you do not ignore the problem, even when you are unsure of the diagnosis or the treatment; you continue to do the best you can with the knowledge you have. You also do not refer the case to a groomer for care. Behavior problems are no different. They must be dealt with or the pets' life will be in danger at some point. Even if you are not a specialist or well versed in the diagnosis and treatment of behavior problems, there are certain basic principles that apply to behavior and learning that can be applied to every case and used to help prevent the worsening of a problem and relieve animal suffering.

History Taking

The task can be greatly simplified for the veterinarian if a thorough behavioral history is collected beforehand. There are a couple of different ways to approach this. The simplest is to have a behavioral history form that clients can take home and fill out and return to the practice. Some practices have these forms on line and allow them to be downloaded, filled out and then returned by e-mail or even completed on line so that they are accessible to the practice on line. There are a variety of different sources for these forms. Most of the texts referenced below have history forms that can be printed out for the practice use and most behaviorists have history forms that they will gladly share with those who request them.

Three Steps

There are three basic steps that can be used in most every behavior case to relieve symptoms, keep pets and owners safe and prevent the worsening of the condition.

1. Identify and actively work to avoid triggers.

Whether the unwanted behavior is aggression, destruction of property, house soiling or even repetitive behaviors, stopping the "practice" of unwanted behaviors is the very first step in keeping a behavior problem from worsening.

It is a simple fact that repetition of behavior strengthens the behavior. In addition, many of the behaviors that animals exhibit that are a problem for us, such as fear related aggression and separation anxiety are classically conditioned behaviors. That means that every time an animal experiences that emotional state in that situation, the emotional state is becoming more firmly associated with that situation. The resulting behaviors that we do not like are occurring due to the animals underlying emotional state; the behavior is simply the response to the emotional state. The more times the animal uses those behaviors in those circumstances in association with those emotions, the greater the likelihood that they will display those behaviors again in the future.

It is critical however to understand that these are not conscious decisions made by the animal. The animal has no more control over them than they do their own breathing or heart rate, but in order to change the behavioral response, we have to change the way they feel about the situation which means we must first stop the repeated association of the event with the emotional state.

Even more straightforward behaviors such as house soiling are best avoided as the first step in treatment. Behaviors such as elimination are self-reinforcing, so when an animal eliminates in a certain location, they are immediately reinforced. It will be very difficult to teach a new location for elimination if one location is being reinforced intermittently, so prevention or avoidance of the opportunity for error is the critical first step!

Other, specific examples of avoidance include: aggression over food – Instruction – Feed animal in a separate room and do not approach food bowl until animal leaves the room and goes outside.

Aggression towards strangers – Prevent pet from meeting strangers!

Aggression towards other dogs – Prevent meeting other dogs! Etc, etc, etc.

2. Improve the relationship with the pet – Build trust and confidence in the fearful or anxious pet

Stop all punishment – Punishment of any kind is contraindicated in any animal with an existing behavior problem. Most behavior problems are a result of fear or anxiety and many of them develop as a result of inappropriately used punishment. A great deal of research exists now to show how damaging punishment can be to the human companion animal bond and how many potential damaging side effects can be caused by punishment.

Clients should also be educated as to the fact that punishment, by definition is anything that decreases the chance a behavior will be repeated, so if a pet owner believes that something they do, such as saying “no” to their pet is effective, but yet they have to say “No” every time their pet does something they do not like, then saying “No” is not really punishment. What is it then? If it stops the animal from performing a behavior at that moment in time, then it is simply acting as an interrupter but it is not leading to long term positive behavior change. It is also very likely to be something that simply causes fear or anxiety in the animal and therefore has a very good chances of making a behavior problem worse or leading to other behaviors that the client will like even less!

In addition, punishment does not teach a dog what we want it *to do*. Punishing behaviors you do not like without teaching a dog appropriate alternative behaviors, seldom results in a long term successful resolution to behavior problems.

Reward the pet for all good behaviors – Too often people focus all of their attention on the behaviors they don't like and forget to reward their dog for behaviors they like. It is so much easier to teach a dog what you want it to do rather than simply punishing all the behaviors you don't like. If you don't like a particular behavior, teaching an alternate behavior and making it more rewarding than the behavior you don't like is the most effective way of teaching your pet what is expected of it. For example, jumping on people is a behavior performed by many dogs that most people dislike. Many dogs are repeatedly punished for this behavior and yet continue to do it, leading to great frustration on the part of the owner and often, increasingly harsher forms of punishment for the dog. Jumping to greet is a behavior that is very highly motivated; it is the nature of the dog to greet others face to face. In order for a dog to do that with a person they must jump. In addition, the behavior is often accidentally rewarded by people because even if they push the dog away or yell at it, they are also making eye contact and the physical and verbal interactions are more rewarding to the dog than punishing. If you don't want a dog to jump to greet, you must teach it an alternative form of greeting that it can be rewarded for! Teaching a dog to sit to greet is very effective, if you will routinely turn away and ignore the dog while it is jumping and only give the dog eye contact and verbal and physical interaction when the dog is seated.

Pet owners should be encouraged to focus attention on their dog when it is performing behaviors they like, not just when they are performing behaviors they don't like! If on occasion, a dog is praised for sitting, or lying calmly or performing any acceptable behavior then they can learn to make those behaviors the default choices when a choice arises. This requires practice and patience, but teaching a dog anything requires practice and patience so why not do it using the most ethical, humane techniques!

Initiate cue-response reward interactions – This instruction simply means that pet owners should begin trying to have very consistent, predictable interactions with their pet rather than casual, unpredictable interactions. It requires that the pet owner begin asking the dog to do something in exchange for things that it wants. The owner gives a cue, (such as sit) the dog responds and the dog then gets a reward. The reward can be access to what the dog wanted or it can be a food or toy reward depending on what activities are being engaged in at the time. Requiring the dog to earn valued resources by responding to a verbal cue helps to build confidence in anxious dogs because they learn that there is a simple, clear and predictable way to get what they want in life. For anxious or fearful animals, predictability and consistency are critical to their emotional well-being.

At the same time, pushy, demanding behavior should be ignored. Only when a dog is performing calm, acceptable behaviors should it then be invited over and rewarded with attention for responding to a "come" cue. The pet learns that anything it wants or needs can come from the owner as long as they are sitting quietly and calmly. They are essentially being taught how to make good things happen for themselves. With time, the dog becomes more likely to obey any cues quickly because he has learned that good things are more likely to happen when he pays attention to his owner. Under these rules, dogs are also learning to look to their owners for guidance in most situations. For example, if a dog is fearful of certain novel stimuli such as strangers or dogs, he may learn to come and sit and look at his owner when confronted with these stimuli. This is a much better and safer choice for the dog to make than the growling, barking or chasing that he may sometimes choose.

Lastly, once owners begin following these protocols, they often find that all the dog was really needing in the first place was clear instruction (“What is it you want me to do?”) and once he begins receiving this necessary information, the dog may automatically become calmer and less anxious.

3. Use Medications, Nutraceuticals or other Tools to Decrease Anxiety

Details of how to use the psychotropic drugs really requires an entire presentation of its own, so the discussion here must remain brief. The most important thing to be aware of is that many animals with problem behaviors are suffering and treatment with anxiolytic drugs, pheromones or nutraceuticals can be a critical part of the treatment plan. Just as you would not deprive an animal experiencing pain from osteoarthritis relief with pain killers, we should not deny animals suffering from chronic anxiety or fear, relief from their emotional distress.

For this discussion, we will consider psychotropic drugs in 2 basic categories; fast acting medications or what we call “event drugs” and slower onset medications or what we call “long term medications. The most commonly used event drugs in general practice will be benzodiazepines or trazodone. These medications act rapidly, last for varying periods of time depending on which drug you pick, are dose dependent and animals vary dramatically in their individual responses to the drugs. You should never give one of these drugs once at one dose and say “it did not work.” The first dose should always be given with the owner present, preferably without the presence of the fear or anxiety inducing stimulus and the animal watched carefully for its response. The benzodiazepines are especially prone to causing paradoxical reactions in which the animal acts more excited and agitated than normal. If the test dose is not given in the absence of the fear or anxiety inducing stimuli, then it is impossible to determine if the drug is simply not working or if you are seeing a paradoxical reaction! Clients must be warned ahead of time that it may take several attempts and possibly several drug changes to find the dose and drug that relieves their pet’s anxiety. You cannot overemphasize that the goal is to relieve anxiety without sedation or “changing their pet’s personality! The goal is to help their pet feel better not turn it into a vegetable!

Long term medications such as fluoxetine and clomipramine may be more familiar to the general practitioner due to marketing of these products but these medications often take 4-6 weeks to take effect so they should not necessarily be the first drug of choice when seeking to relieve suffering quickly. They often play a valuable role in the overall treatment plan and behaviorists regularly combine them with event medications for treatment of fear and anxiety related problems. The references below all contain excellent information for how to go about doing this.

Pheromones and their effects were covered in a previous presentation. Be aware that Adaptil and Feliway have both been shown to play a useful role in decreasing the signs associated with anxiety in many dogs and cats. They can be safely used in conjunction with all other products mentioned here when they do not achieve the desired level of relief when used alone.

Anxitane® (Virbac) contains L-theanine, a green tea extract that increases brain dopamine, serotonin and GABA levels. Several clinical trials have shown a reduction in global anxiety scores in both dogs and cats when treated with *Anxitane*®. A single double blind placebo controlled study showed reduced fear of human beings in a laboratory model of anxiety-related behavior in beagles.

Alpha-S1 tryptic casein is the active ingredient in Zylkene® (Vetoquinol). It binds to GABA_A receptors in the brain, mimicking the action of GABA, an inhibitory neurotransmitter. It has been found to have anti-anxiolytic effects in humans, dogs, cats, rats and horses.

Calm Diet® (Royal Canin) contains alpha-casozepine (tryptic bovine alpha s1-casein hydrolysate) and L-tryptophan as well as an increased ratio of tryptophan to large neutral amino acids compared to commonly available commercial diet. It also contains nicotinamide, which increases the affinity of GABA for its receptors, creating a calming effect. A single study that assessed efficacy of this product found that it may help some individual dogs cope with stressful events. Because of the concentration of active ingredients in this product it is only effective in animals under 15 kg (33 lbs). A second study looking at the efficacy of caseinate hydrolysate alone on signs of stress in dogs had similar findings.

Solliquin™ (Nutrimax), is a nutraceutical intended for relief of the clinical signs associated with fear, stress and anxiety in dogs and cats. It is a natural proprietary blend of L-theanine, extracts of magnolia officinalis & phellodendron amurense with a whey protein concentrate. This is a relatively new product and no clinical studies looking at its efficacy have been published yet, although some may be currently underway.

Conclusion

Taking these three steps when confronted with a patient with a problem behavior will slow the progression of the condition, stop or at least decrease the suffering, keep people and pets safe and ultimately prevent the steady destruction of the human-companion animal bond that occurs when pets have behavior problems. While these steps may not always change the pet's behavior in a way that the owner desires; in other words, this is not the way you will teach the dog that is fearful of people to love visiting with strangers, it gives you the opportunity to discuss realistic goals with the pet owner. Most pet owners have very unrealistic goals for their pets and must understand that if they seek to make **big** change in an animal's behavior, it requires **big** efforts on their part. Reducing a dog's fear of strangers or other dogs will require all of the above steps PLUS additional work using behavior modification techniques such as desensitization and counter conditioning. Most pet owners will need to invest time and money to work with a skilled, professional trainer who is familiar with these techniques and the use of positive reinforcement in order to make these kinds of changes. In my experience, I find that once most people find out how difficult that is to do, they are happy to simply make the changes necessary to keep their pet and family safe, relieve their pet's suffering and continue to keep their pet in their home. Ultimately, this should be everyone's goal.

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