Understanding Fear and Anxiety in Pets

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Anxiety and fear are some of the most common contributing factors to behavior problems in dogs and cats. Anxiety and/or fear can manifest in several different ways, including: destruction, vocalization, house soiling and aggression. In fact, fear and anxiety are at the root of most aggression problems in dogs. Dogs and cats may also experience anxiety or fear associated with thunderstorms or other loud noises, traveling in the car, strange people or animals, as well as separation from their owners. Chronic anxiety can also result in stress related illnesses such as gastrointestinal upset, decreased resistance to disease and urinary tract problems in cats (FIC).

As is the case with most behavior problems, fear and anxiety typically worsen with time. They also become more resistant to successful treatment, so the veterinary staff needs to be attentive to signs of fear and anxiety in their patients and pay attention when clients mention any behavior problem. Informing the client of the danger of ignoring the problem is an important responsibility, as is seeing that they are given appropriate advice regarding referral. In addition, it is incumbent upon the healthcare team to “do no harm” and not do or suggest things that can make the behavior worse.

**Some important definitions**

*Fear* is an emotion that induces an animal to avoid situations and activities that may be dangerous. The emotional response occurs when an animal perceives that something or someone is dangerous. The key word here is “perceives”. It is critical that veterinarians and pet owners understand that just because they do not believe that the person or thing is to be feared, does not mean that the fear is not real to the pet. The pets’ “perception” is their “reality” and that is what the pet will act on. Normally fear is an adaptive response. It results in the animal showing an avoidance response that would, in the natural world, serve to keep it safe. However, in the home environment, it can lead to behavior that is unacceptable to the pet owner, such as aggression, destruction or excessive vocalization.

*Phobias* are persistent and excessive fears of certain things or situations that are usually out of proportion to the actual threat that they present. Animals anticipating exposure to these stimuli will often display anxiety. An animal’s response to actual exposure to the stimuli can result in a range of responses from relatively mild symptoms of anxiety to extreme panic and even catatonia. Serious injury may occur when animals exhibit such a severe panic response that they chew or tear through doors or windows in an apparent attempt to escape from the frightening stimuli.
Anxiety is the anticipation of future danger that may be unknown, imagined or real. It results in physiological responses that are similar to those associated with fear. The animal may begin to pace, pant, tremble and salivate. Pupils dilate and heart rate, blood pressure and respiratory rate may increase. Anxious or fearful animals may exhibit avoidance behaviors such as hiding and may be hyper vigilant; ie. Constantly on alert and possibly even startling at the slightest sudden stimuli. In the case of intense fear, an animal may lose bladder and bowel control and may express its anal sacs.

Stress by definition, is any stress or strain placed on a system. While a certain amount of anxiety or fear may be adaptive in some situations, an animal that experiences fear or anxiety frequently, especially if unable to safely escape from fear inducing stimuli, will begin to suffer from stress and its effects. Since the initial result of fear and anxiety is a physiologic one involving autonomic arousal and stimulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (and accompanying release of stress hormones), eventually the animal can suffer physical harm such as an increased susceptibility to disease secondary to suppression of the immune system.

Recognizing the body language of fear and anxiety
In addition to the physiological signs described above, animals that are fearful or anxious will display body postures consistent with these emotions. In dogs, the ears are typically lowered, the head and neck may be lowered, the tail will be lowered and possibly even tucked between the rear legs and up against the abdomen. The fearful dog will probably avoid eye contact. The eyes will be wide open and the whites of the eyes may be showing. They may turn their entire body side ways to you and roll over in a posture of complete submission or simply try to escape the situation completely. The message being sent by the animal demonstrating these postures is “Don't come any closer!” If the frightening person or animal continues to approach, in spite of the signals being sent, then some dogs will attempt to use aggression to make the scary individual go away. They may bare their teeth, growl, snap and/or bite. The likelihood that they will progress quickly to biting, as opposed to just snarling or snapping, depends on many factors, including learning and experience. Many dogs that are punished for showing their teeth, snarling or snapping, will learn quickly to forego those gestures and bite first, because it is almost always affective at making people go away!

In addition to these more obvious visual signals, people should be aware that dogs show some very subtle signs of being anxious or uncomfortable, often in combination with the above signs, and sometimes before they even show those more obvious visual cues. Most commonly anxious, fearful dogs will lick their lips repeatedly, yawn or make “jaw popping” sounds, while averting their eyes. Some anxious dogs will suddenly divert their attention and begin scratching or licking at themselves.

It should be noted here that most aggression in the veterinary clinic and in fact most human directed aggression in dogs is fear related, not due to the dog trying to be “dominant” as many try to suggest. If you will be observant you will note that most dogs acting aggressively in the clinic will also be struggling to get away or at the very least, their ears and tail will be pinned back and they will probably be shrinking away from the person trying to restrain them. This is in
direct contrast to the confident dog, whose body will be stiff, with weight on the forelegs, with the tail, ears and head held upward and stiff. Even the bared teeth of a confident dog differ from those of the fearful dog. The confident, assertive dog, one that might be said to be behaving in a dominant manner, will retract the lips around the most rostral part of the mouth, showing mostly canines and incisors. The fearful dog will be more likely to open its mouth wide and retract its lips in such a way as to show most all of its teeth.

In the veterinary clinic, many cats will display fearful behavior. A fearful cat will crouch, keep its tail low, (sometimes drawing it completely under the body) and will flatten its ears straight back on its head. This is in contrast to the more offensively aggressive cat who will walk stiffly with its tail hanging straight down and whose ears will be lowered but directed sideways. The fearful cat is more likely to open its mouth wide, showing teeth, and hiss. The pupils are also likely to be dilated indicating autonomic arousal. Reading cat body language offers many challenges, one being their ability to change their facial expressions very rapidly. This is why many cat owners will complain about the cat that allows petting for a while and then suddenly, “without any warning” turn and bite them “viciously”. These cats often demonstrate signs that they are tiring of the contact but they are so subtle and often occur just a second or two before they bite. These subtle signs may include a slight stiffening of the body, twitching of the tail tip and possibly even dilation of the pupils.

Why do pets experience anxiety related problems?

Dogs or cats not given appropriate exercise or outlets for their normal behaviors may experience anxiety. An unpredictable social environment or unpredictable interactions with people are often a cause of anxiety. In particular when punishment is ill timed or harsh, anxiety is a common result. Animals that are not appropriately socialized when young, particularly during their critical socialization period, are likely to develop fears associated with novel people, experiences or environments. This can result in generalized anxiety and possibly even the development of phobias such as those to loud noises.

A lack of, or inappropriate socialization is very likely one of the more important contributing factors. While many clients have heard about the importance of “socialization”, many do not understand exactly what socialization is or how to go about properly socializing a pet. To further complicate the problem, many have heard that they must not allow their new pet to be around other animals until they have been fully vaccinated. Since most puppies are not considered fully vaccinated until 14-16 weeks of age, the potential for missing the most critical period for socialization (from 4-16 weeks of age) is enormous and can have extreme and lasting consequences on the animals suitability as a pet. During the 4th through 16th week of life puppies are learning about their environment, about other dogs and about people. Dogs that have no (or limited) exposure to people or other dogs during this period tend to be fearful and may be aggressive when exposed to strange dogs and people. The young pup’s experiences with people and other dogs also need to be positive ones. Taking a puppy to a puppy class and forcing it to interact with other dogs while it is shaking, cringing and trying to escape is not
“socialization”! This is essentially teaching a dog that other dogs and strangers are indeed scary things to be feared.

While puppy classes are one way to offer socialization to puppies, they are not the only way. Owners can take puppies to visit friends or family members who have other well-vaccinated dogs of similar age or size. They can take puppies with them to places where they can meet strangers and experience novel sights and sounds. Interested strangers should be encouraged to pet the puppy and offer it small treats carried by the owner for this purpose. In this way, puppies learn to associate strangers and strange places with good things happening. Owners should avoid taking their puppies to places where unvaccinated dogs may have roamed, such as dog parks and other public areas, until the puppy has been completely vaccinated. If they choose to take their puppy to a puppy class, they should verify that all puppies attending have been required to have at least their first vaccination, that none appear ill, that floors are made of materials that are easily sanitized and that any puppy waste is removed promptly and the soiled area disinfected. Veterinarians can insure that their new puppy owners acquire proper, safe socialization by offering puppy classes at their clinic or knowing to which area puppy classes they can safely refer their clients. Many resources about how to teach puppy classes are available.

It is easy to overlook the need for feline socialization; most people don’t expect their cats to go places with them and meet strange people or strange animals. Fearful cats are more likely to simply hide from fear inducing stimuli so are less likely to be presented for problems associated with poor socialization unless they become offensive towards visitors or other cats in the household. While the socialization period of the cat is much shorter than that of the dog (lasting from about 2 to 7 weeks of age) exposing them to a variety of novelty in their early months of life is still likely to help them cope with novelty as adults. This early and brief socialization period is just one reason why feral cats can be so hard to tame. Ideally, kittens should be handled by people regularly between 2 and six weeks of age so as to increase the chances that they will be friendly towards people.

Numerous studies have shown that several different behavioral traits associated with a dogs’ personality are heritable. In particular, shyness or fearfulness is a highly heritable trait. Clients interested in acquiring purebred dogs should be informed of the important role that genetics plays in a dog’s temperament and choose the breed and individual puppy carefully. The dam, and preferably the sire as well, should be available when looking at a litter of puppies since their behavior is probably the best predictor of the puppies’ future behavior.

Genetics have also been shown to be important in determining the personality of cats. Studies have shown that kittens whose fathers are friendly are more likely to be friendly than kittens born of unfriendly fathers.

A particular traumatic event may lead to an animal developing a fear or phobic response to a particular stimulus. Some individuals, for reasons that we don’t fully understand, develop profound fears or phobias based on a single traumatic event; this is often referred to as “one
trial “or “single trial learning”. It appears to be more likely to occur in a young animal, but can feasibly occur at any age. Understanding the effects of events like this can be challenging as the animal often responds in ways that we might not expect. For example, an animal frightened by a loud noise such as nearby explosion, may not develop a fear of loud noises but could feasibly develop a fear of the person or animal that was standing nearby at the time of the loud noise. This demonstrates why the collection of a detailed history is so critical. The veterinarian and staff must learn to ask clients to give them the details of what happened (what they saw), not what they believe happened. Pet owners tend to want to interpret their pets behavior for the veterinarian, but must be discouraged from doing this in order for the veterinarian to be able to get a complete picture of the event and determine what the animal has experienced.

**Pain or discomfort may lead to increased anxiety.** Pain is one of the most commonly and easily overlooked causes of fear and anxiety in pets. Since our patients can’t tell us when they are uncomfortable, it is easy to overlook problems until they become severe and cause extreme pain. Often times, radiographs, blood work and even ultrasound do not reveal problems in their very early stages so an animal may suffer from chronic, low levels of pain or discomfort that can lead to changes in behavior. Osteoarthritis is probably the most common condition to lead to subtle changes in behavior. Dogs that were previously well house trained may begin eliminating in the house because it is too uncomfortable to go outside. Cats with osteoarthritis will often quit using their litter box because it hurts to step up into it or because it is located somewhere in the house that is difficult for the cat to access. Any animal over 5-6 years of age suddenly develops a fear or anxiety related behavior problem should be evaluated very thoroughly for an underlying medical condition.

**Cognitive decline is sometimes accompanied by increased anxiety.** Increasing levels of anxiety are often noticed in an aging animal that is experiencing cognitive decline. Animals experiencing cognitive decline are often disoriented and may appear confused at times. Individuals experiencing this confusion may be more sensitive to changes in their routine, loud unexpected noises, and separation from their owners; things that previously may not have appeared to concern them. When presented with a pet over the age of 7 that has recently begun to show signs of anxiety, cognitive decline should be considered.

**What can the veterinary healthcare team do to prevent or treat anxiety related problems?**

1. Recommend proper socialization.

2. Teach clients the importance of not using punishment since it can easily worsen the pet’s behavior.

3. Teach clients the basics of reward based training and how a consistent command-response-reward type of interaction can help to decrease anxiety.

4. Teach the importance of avoiding stimuli that lead to fear or anxiety and not forcing fearful animals into situations that they are clearly worried about. Many clients mistakenly believe that
constantly exposing an animal to the stimulus that it is afraid of will result in the pet eventually losing their fear of that stimulus. However, in most cases, this actually serves to worsen the problem by further sensitizing the animal to the stimuli. Complete avoidance of the fearful stimuli can at least stop or slow the progression of the problem until further behavior modification can be started.

5. Be familiar with the concepts of desensitization and counter conditioning - When the particular stimuli that cause fear and anxiety can be identified, then the animal can be desensitized to those stimuli so that they no longer cause fear or anxiety. Desensitization is the process where an individual is exposed to the stimulus that causes fear or anxiety at such a low level that the fear or anxiety is not triggered. The exposure is repeated with the stimuli being increased very slowly until eventually the animal does not respond to it. Desensitization alone can be a very time consuming and slow process but it does work when performed correctly. Adding counter conditioning or counter commanding to the process of desensitization can help the process to move much faster. Counter conditioning is simply the part of the process where small food treats are constantly fed to the animal while the stimulus is presented. Eating is a pleasant, relaxing behavior that is inconsistent with fear or anxiety so the animal learns over time to associate the stimulus with a comfortable emotional state rather than a fearful or anxious one. Counter commanding is similar but subtly different; the animal is asked to respond to a command such as “sit” and rewarded with a small treat for responding. This command-response-reward protocol is repeated while the stimulus is presented at a very low level. These procedures can be highly effective but many pet owners have problems with them and can benefit from the assistance of a good trainer. When DS/CC fails it is usually because the dog is presented with the stimulus at too high of a level in the beginning or the intensity of the stimulus is increased too fast, before the dog is ready to experience it at higher intensities. Flooding is a technique that seems to be increasing in popularity in spite of its many potential drawbacks. Flooding is performed by exposing an animal to the stimulus it fears, at full force, until the animal stops responding in a fearful manner. This technique requires that the animal not be able to escape the stimulus, so the animal must be under good control, usually using some type of collar or leash. If the animal manages to escape the stimulus, or if the stimulus is withdrawn too soon, before the animal completely relaxes, the fearful behavior is only reinforced so the problem has been made worse instead of better. Not only can flooding be extremely traumatic but it can be dangerous as well. Animals can injure themselves and their owners while panicking and trying to escape the stimulus.

6. Medication can play a very important role in the treatment of fear and anxiety related behavior problems. However, they are only one tool and they rarely lead to long term success on their own. Medication is most effective when combined with a complete behavior modification protocol.

Fear and anxiety in the veterinary clinic

There are also many things that can be done to improve fear and anxiety associated with visiting the veterinary clinic. All pets should receive food rewards of some type (unless
scheduled for surgery) while being restrained, handled, examined and injected. Pets can easily learn to associate these experiences with good things, ie food, if we just take the time to do that. Recognizing the visual cues of animals that are already afraid is crucial. You can avoid leaning over them, staring at them and reaching over them so that you do not make their fear and anxiety worse. Standing sideways to the animal, squatting and allowing them to approach you for treats can make a huge difference in your ability to handle the animal at this appointment and during future appointments!