



Why Low Stress?

Fear and Anxiety in Our Pets, and How We Can Help

Adapted from articles by behavior specialists Valarie V. Tynes, DVM, DACVB and Rachel Lees, RVT

For far too long, many veterinarians and pet owners have accepted the fact that a certain amount of fear displayed by pets in the veterinary clinic is "normal." Although it is important to minimize bite and scratch injuries to staff and clients, it is equally important to prevent potentially serious mental damage to fearful pets.

Many pets perceive threats where none exist. Pets that have been through the shelter system are a good example. When these dogs or cats demonstrate fearful or anxious behavior, it is common for pet owners to simply assume the pet was abused. While this is possible, it is more common that many fearful and anxious animals are born with these behavioral tendencies and never receive appropriate socialization and training. These behaviors of *shyness* or *fearfulness* are highly heritable from the pet's parents. The more quickly the problems are recognized and dealt with, the more likely the pet can be helped. Ignoring the problem only extends the pet's suffering.



Over the past few decades, zoo veterinarians have progressively moved to less physical or chemical restraint and more training, helping their patients to participate in their own medical care. If a 400-lb lion can be taught to present its tail for blood collection or a 500-lb bottle nose dolphin to present its abdomen for an ultrasound, why not teach dogs and cats to tolerate physical examination and blood collection with minimal restraint and distress?

FAS defined

Fear- a primitive brain response that occurs when an animal *thinks* that something or someone is dangerous, even if no one else thinks the stimulus should cause fear.

Anxiety- the anticipation of future danger that may be unknown, imagined, or real. Pets that live in a constant state of anxiety are not healthy, and can benefit from behavioral help.

Stress- the hormonal and physical changes that occur when a pet is anxious or fearful.

Signs of Fear & Anxiety

When pets experience fear or anxiety, they may begin to pace, pant, tremble, and salivate. Pupils dilate and heart rate, blood pressure, and respiratory rate may increase. Pets may crouch, flatten their ears, avoid eye contact, or hide. Other signs include can include frequent lip licking, yawning with a tense face, displacement grooming, hypervigilance (constantly on alert) and flinching. Intense fear can also cause pets to urinate, defecate, or express the anal sacs.



This dog is displaying signs of fear including avoiding eye contact, lowered ears and head, and visible whites of its eyes.

Pets that are experiencing FAS may try to flee, fight, fidget, or freeze. Unfortunately, fidgeting can be misinterpreted as playing, and freezing can be misinterpreted as cooperation. If these signs are ignored, pets may learn that their normal methods of body language communication don't work, and they may be more likely to struggle or fight during the next visit. It is important for veterinarians, veterinary staff, and pet owners to be aware of signs of fear so everyone can work together to change the treatment plan and reduce stress for each pet as needed.



This dog is exhibiting frequent lip licking (a sign of anxiety or discomfort with the situation the dog is in) in the examination room.

Negative Effects

Any time a pet feels threatened, stress hormones are released and affect multiple body systems. The “fight or flight” response will interfere with digestion, growth, immune function, and pain perception. In addition, memory and sensory function are enhanced. Memories of stressful events will be very powerful, and how pets are handled during these times can have long-term consequences for future handling.

Stress hormones will also cause changes in blood and urine samples collected for medical testing. Pets will also show different behaviors when

stressed, and these changes can make it more difficult to properly diagnose and treat medical conditions in the veterinary clinic.

Chronic stress can cause muscle disease, fatigue, high blood pressure, decreased growth rates, gastrointestinal distress (diarrhea, decreased appetite), and decreased immune function (pets are more likely to get sick). In severe cases, pets develop structural and functional changes in the brain, and permanent damage can result.

How can we help?

Training

Pets can be trained to actively participate in their veterinary care, just like the lions and dolphins. Repetition is important for long-term learning in pets, so multiple short training sessions at home each day will have the most impact. Similar to learning “Sit” or “Stay”, pets can be trained to offer paws for nail trimming and legs for blood collection. They can also learn to hold still for different types of restraint and receive treatments for the ears, eyes, and mouth. Training pets with cue words can then help these learned behaviors transition into the veterinary setting.

Social Visits

Once pets are comfortable with handling and treatment at home, they can practice these skills at the veterinary clinic. Social visits are designed to minimize fear triggers (no needles!) while getting pets comfortable with each step of the veterinary visit. These visits build on the training at home so pets can arrive relaxed and confident when medical care is needed.

Pre-Visit Calming Medications (PVMs)

Depending on the level of FAS a pet is experiencing, pre-visit calming medications may be recommended *with* training and social visits to decrease the fear, anxiety, or stress pets may associate with veterinary visits. These medications are intended to address specific neurotransmitters to turn down the “panic button” so the pet can focus on the positive aspects of the visit like treats and petting. Once a pet is able to focus on something positive, they can learn to associate those positive outcomes with the action that may have initially caused fear. This process is known as desensitization and counter-conditioning.

Giving a pet medication with the intent to tranquilize or slow down reaction time is inappropriate if the underlying fear or anxiety triggers are not being addressed. That's not what is being recommended. PVMs are never recommended alone without training, behavioral, or environmental modification. Pets do require customized doses of pre-visit calming medications, and dose trials are needed to find the right effect for each pet.

Many different medications can be used to reduce a pet's fear, anxiety, and stress. Several medications may be suggested, including:

- Gabapentin
- Trazodone
- Alprazolam
- Clonidine
- Lorazepam

All these medications are used "off label" in dogs and cats. This means the FDA has not approved these medications for use in dogs and cats. However, the medications listed above have been studied, documented, and used in veterinary practices for years and are considered safe for use. Side effects with any of these medications can include lethargy, vomiting, diarrhea, or changes in appetite.

With any anti-anxiety medication there is the risk of disinhibition of aggression (loss of conscious control of the aggression response) or paradoxical excitement (in which the patient experiences the reverse effect of the medication).

Most of the medications listed above are known as "quick" acting. This means that once the medication is given it will take two to three hours to see the full effect. For most pets, the medication is in and out of the system in eight to 12 hours. It is recommended to try the medication at home first and report the effects to the veterinary team. The effects of the medication may be decreased when the pet is away from home, so dosage adjustments may still be needed based on the pet's behavior in the clinic.

Summary

The effects of fear and anxiety are profound and distressing for the pets that experience them. Pets that demonstrate fear or anxiety need to be recognized and treated. They do not deserve to suffer simply because their suffering is not recognized. By recognizing fearful animals and decreasing their fear through training and pre-visit calming medications, we can move toward a collaborative, low-stress form of handling and away from the "manhandling" methods of the past. Your VetWell care team cares greatly about your pet's wellbeing, so while we are trying to keep your pet healthy medically, we will not ignore signs of unhappiness such as fear, stress, and anxiety that are present. We look forward to partnering with you for your pet's best health and happiness.



This puppy shows several signs of fear, including lowered ears and head, avoidance of eye contact, a furrowed brow, and visible whites of his eyes.

Lees, Rachel. "What's a PVP? An Expert Explains." *FearFreeHappyHomes.com*, 26 Aug 2019, www.fearfreehappyhomes.com/whats-a-pvp-an-expert-explains/. Accessed 13 May 2021.

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