Low-Stress Handling – VT VMA – Feb 2023

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Low-stress / Fear-free
  • Why bother?
    – In the veterinary workplace, the biggest hazard is animal restraint
    – Most animals are fearful and may react aggressively → resulting in injuries!
    – Most veterinary clinic injuries are due to dog and cat bites

The Science…
  • Fear / anxiety results from:
    – Transportation to the hospital
    – Novel (unfamiliar) hospital environment – scents, sounds, and sights
    – Unfamiliar people and animals
    – Handling / restraint
    – Unpleasant and sometimes painful procedures
  • One negative experience can condition a fear response
  • Learned fear results in fidgeting, escape attempts, and/or aggression at subsequent visits
  • Stress associated with veterinary hospital visits has been demonstrated to increase:
    – Urinary cortisol
    – Blood pressure
    – Temperature, heart rate, and respiratory rate
    – Blood glucose in cats

Signs of fear and anxiety in cats
  • Body postures
    – Crouching
    – Lowered head
    – Ears out / lowered or flattened
    – Arched back
    – Paws drawn in towards body
    – Tail swishing!
  • Facial changes
    – Dilated pupils
    – Ears flattened
  • Vocalizations
    – Meowing
    – Growling
    – Hissing
    – Spitting
Feline body language
•  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvsfB7sf4QU&list=PLQD3XCKxm29HQ8h3364LMwcPxvkL9gJ&index=17](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvsfB7sf4QU&list=PLQD3XCKxm29HQ8h3364LMwcPxvkL9gJ&index=17)

Signs of Fear and Anxiety in Dogs
•  Yawning
•  Lip licking
•  Brief body freeze
•  ‘Whale eye’
•  Head turn
•  Shaking
•  Tense jaw
•  Low tail carriage
•  Piloerection

Managing Fear & Anxiety in the Clinic
Two groups are selling programs to reduce stress during veterinary visits
•  Low Stress Handling
  – Begun by Dr. Sophia Yin

•  Fear Free
  – Begun by Dr. Marty Becker

•  Both have paid online courses

Low-Stress Veterinary Visits
•  Benefits
  – Reduced fear for the pet
  – Reduced anxiety for the client
  – Earlier detection of diseases
  – Increased client confidence in veterinary team → better lifelong care for the pet
  – Fewer injuries to pet, clients, and veterinary staff
  – Enhanced efficiency, productivity, and job satisfaction for veterinary team

•  [http://www.catalystcouncil.org/resources/health_welfare/cat_friendly_practices/](http://www.catalystcouncil.org/resources/health_welfare/cat_friendly_practices/)

Low-stress veterinary visits for dogs
•  Make it a fun, positive experience for dog and owner
  – Give LOTS of yummy treats (beware of food allergies)

•  Offer Adaptil® bandanas at check-in
• Use medication when appropriate BEFORE the visit
• Have reactive or aggressive dogs wait in the car and/or enter from side lobby directly to a room
• Separate comfort rooms for reactive dogs
  – Keep pet with owner during visit to avoid causing separation anxiety
• Use calming caps (ThunderCap)
• Work WITH the patients, not against them!

Wrong Way to Approach
• Staring directly at dog, using hard eye contact
• Approaching from the front
• Approaching from above/ leaning over
• Touching sensitive places:
  – Top of head, belly, feet

Correct way to approach
• Approach in a friendly (not forceful) manner

Towel wrap for dogs

Counterconditioning to injections

Counterconditioning to nail trims

Work as a team with owners
• Why do we take patients “to the back?”
• Is the patient better without the owner?
• Are they in the freeze stage of fight, flight, freeze or fidget?
• Owners can:
  – Pet
  – Feed
  – Comfort patient
Pheromones

- Chemical signals
  - Urine, skin, paws, etc.
- Feliway® (Sprays, wipes, diffusers)
  - Synthetic analog of feline facial hormone
  - Emotional stabilization
  - Reassures cat in a stressful situation
- Adaptil® (Sprays, collars, diffusers)
  - Synthetic analog of canine appeasing hormone emitted by a bitch at whelping

Studies on the use of transmucosal dexmedetomidine in dogs

- Dexmedetomidine facilitated handling and restraint of aggressive dogs.
- In-hospital administration of dexmedetomidine reduced signs of stress during veterinary exams.

What about cats?
Reducing stress for cats

- Teach cat to love its carrier – feed cat in carrier for a week ahead of visit
- Teach cat to love car rides
- Spray carrier with Feliway® 20 min before journey
- Put towel over carrier
- Secure carrier in car

The Carrier

- For the cat, the fear and anxiety begin with the carrier

Carrier Protocols

- Use easy to open, top-loading cat carriers
- Leave carrier out for the cat to explore
- Place soft bedding in the carrier
- Encourage cat to investigate with treats, catnip, or toys
- Spray or wipe inside of carrier with Feliway®
• Spray or wipe inside of carrier with Feliway® the day of appointment
• Entice cat into the carrier
• Cover the carrier with a blanket or towel

Travel Anxiety
• Is it anxiety or nausea or both?
• Acclimate to carrier (CC/DS)
• Crate, seatbelt, calming cap
• Pheromones (Feliway® or Adaptil® in the carrier and in the car)
• Pharmaceutical intervention
  – When appropriate
  – Give BEFORE traveling

Low-stress veterinary visits for cats
• Separate waiting areas / cat wards
• Provide towel sprayed with Feliway at check-in (to cover carrier)
• Shelves for carriers (well above dog level)
• Schedule appointments to minimize waiting time
• Schedule cats separately from dogs
• Allow owner and cat to wait in exam room
• Encourage owners to bring an item from home (with familiar scent)
• Use towel for restraint (do NOT scruff)
• See Feline Friendly Handling Guidelines

The best place to examine a cat

Handling & Restraint
• Minimal handling and restraint is always best
• Patience is crucial!
• Use a “hands-off” approach
• Move slowly and carefully
• Use smallest gauge needle possible (ultra-thin wall)
• Best to prevent and avoid stressful or confrontational encounters
• It is extremely difficult to placate a pet who is fully aroused

Feline Patients
• 1st rule is: **TAKE YOUR TIME!**
• A frightened cat can remain highly aroused up to 30 min
• Stop the examination / procedure at first signs of tension or agitation
• Allow cat to retain sense of control

Patience with Patients
• 2nd rule is: **START AGAIN!**
• Once cat returns to baseline arousal, continue with the exam / procedure

Studies on the use of trazodone for cats
• Efficacy of a single dose of trazodone hydrochloride given to cats prior to veterinary visits to reduce signs of transport- and examination-related anxiety
• Use of oral trazodone for sedation in cats: a pilot study

Study on the use of gabapentin in cats
• An oral dose of gabapentin 2 hours prior to vet visit reduced fear aggressive behaviors during a PE
• An oral dose of 100-mg gabapentin given to cats 90 minutes before traveling significantly reduced stress-related behaviors during transport and examination, and decreased aggression and increased compliance during examination.

Educate your clients
• AAFP client and veterinarian resources
• If the owner struggles at home to get the cat in the carrier, the cat will be anxious before even arriving at the clinic
• Travel anxiety in cats is reduced if they are comfortable in their carriers