



HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY

Behavior Modification Handout

Stress and Your Pet

Animals experience and express stress in different ways and stress is not always a bad thing. Simple stress could be brought on by feeding time being a little late or some other everyday routine that has been interrupted. These simple daily stressors help our pets learn to cope and function in our busy lives. It is when stress turns into distress that you can begin to see problems. An animal that is in distress or under the constant pressure of stressors will often develop behavior issues. A cat that has always faithfully used a litter box suddenly starts having accidents in the house. A dog that has always been friendly with house guests starts to avoid company and may even growl or snap. If your family pet is experiencing behaviors that are not normal for him or he just seems to develop behavior problems “out of the blue” a good hard look at how his environment is affecting him can often help solve problems before they become bad habits

Starting Off on the Right Paw / Managing Your Environment

Creating a safe place for your pet, such as a crate or a quiet room where his resources are is an important part of providing a mentally healthy environment. Everyone needs a place they can call their own, away from the hustle and bustle of daily life. A place to retreat to when things get overwhelming, your pet may actually choose his own safe place that he likes to sleep or rest. The entire family should respect the sanctity of this safe place and when your pet goes there to rest or chew a favorite toy he should be left alone and not bothered by the kids or other family pets.

Practicing calming exercises and observing quiet time (time out, take a break, if your pet becomes over aroused during play or some other exciting activity interrupt the behavior and allow your pet time to calm himself down) can be critical to reducing and avoiding stressful situations such as redirected aggression (rough play turns into a fight).

Recognizing Stress

It is important to be familiar with your pet’s normal routine and behaviors so you will readily notice when something is wrong. Stress can be brought on by many things:

- House guests
- Moving
- Any change in routine
- New baby in the house
- Illness of a pet or family member
- New stimulus in the outside environment – new neighbor moves in with outside pets, construction / road work, yard man, pool guy

Being able to identify the trigger will be helpful in resolving and avoiding constant stressful situations for you and your pet. Some signs that your pet may be stressed are:

- Excessive panting / drooling
- Pacing / restlessness

- Loss of appetite
- Excessive shedding
- Hiding / avoidance behaviors / escape behaviors
- Decreased social behaviors / doesn't want to play or be petted
- House training accidents

There are also very subtle body postures that are signs of oncoming stress:

- Avoiding eye contact / frequent glancing away
- Yawning
- Displacement behaviors / sudden interesting smell on the ground, grooming
- Lip / Nose licking

Watch your pet the next time you visit the veterinarian and you will probably see some of these behaviors. Recognizing the signs of stress and understanding your dog's reactions to it will give you the tools necessary to help him overcome and avoid behavior problems that can be associated with distress.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

You should never punish your pet for having stress related behavior issues. Using punishment will only cause your pet to be more frightened, experience increased stress levels and complicate the training process. Punishment will not help your pet to overcome his fears and accept a frightening situation as non-threatening. Using a desensitizing process will gradually help your pet be less frightened and more confident in his environment. You can see the "Fearful Cat" and "Fearful Dog" behavior modification handouts for more information on desensitizing training.

Tips and Hints

- Never force your pet to interact with something he is afraid of. Trying to show him there is "nothing to be afraid of" will only cause him to experience the situation under extreme stress and possibly make the problem and the fear worse.
- Providing a safe place for your pet such as a spare bedroom where his feeding area and sleeping area can be isolated from the rest of the house is important and allows him to have a comfortable refuge.
- Avoid any new stimulus if your dog is already fearful and keep his routine as normal as possible.
- It will be natural for you to want to comfort your pet if he becomes frightened. However petting or picking up your dog or puppy if he is fearful and aroused may cause a scratch or bite. It is best to remove the frightening stimulus and allow your pet to calm down before handling him.
- Always make sure the behavior problem your pet is experiencing is not related to a medical condition and review your pet's problem thoroughly with your vet.
- Exercise can help to reduce stress. Find an activity your dog enjoys and take time to play a fun game with him.