Introduction To The Fear Free Initiative

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While every visit to the veterinary hospital may never be completely fear free, by paying close attention to the visual cues that our patients are sending us and working to make the visit as low stress as possible, we can still make a huge improvement upon the typical experience that patients have in the veterinary hospital. “Why is that even important?” you may ask. There are actually a variety of reasons, one of the most important being the learning experience that every animal has when they come to the clinic and discover that scary things are going to happen to them, and there is nothing they can do about it. In these situations, we must be aware that it does not matter that we do not think the experience is scary or we are trying to not behave in a scary fashion. All that matters is how the pet perceives the experience! If they perceive it as scary, then they will have a memory of the experience as scary and next time they return to the clinic, they will be prepared to defend themselves, possibly in a more aggressive manner against the threat that they remember well. Allowing this unpleasant learning experience to occur ensures that our job of providing health care for this patient will become increasingly difficult with every subsequent visit.

A second reason it is important to improve the experience animals are having in our clinic is due to the fact that fear and anxiety are the underlying cause for a huge number of the behavior problems we see in pets. When you see a pet in the clinic that is fearful or anxious, there is a high likelihood that the pet has fear and anxiety related problems in other contexts. Taking the opportunity to discuss them with the owner, sooner rather than later, increases the chance these problems can be identified and treated appropriately. Since these problems always worsen with time (all that varies is the degree to which they do so) it is critical that they be dealt with before they become a problem that results in a broken human animal bond and a relinquished pet. Behavior problems are still a leading cause of owner relinquishment to shelters so is a completely unnecessary loss of patients and income to the practice.

There are many reasons to take a lower stress approach to handling your patients, but ultimately the most important is probably the oath that every veterinarian has taken to prevent animal suffering. We cannot continue to treat animals’ physical health at the expense of their emotional health! There is a growing awareness that physical and mental health issues can be very intricately related so you cannot successfully treat physical conditions while ignoring the behavioral issues that may be influencing them, and physical problems leading to pain or discomfort is a commonly overlooked cause of behavioral change in many pets.

Reading Body Language

In order to be most successful at maintaining a pet friendly practice, you must begin by learning to read animal body language and respond to it appropriately. There are many excellent resources in text books and on line for helping you learn to read body language, but the single most important thing you can be doing is being more observant of animal body language. If you can recognize the signs of fear, anxiety and stress before it becomes severe, you will be able to prevent it from worsening. Our body language is equally important if we are to keep our patients from being uncomfortable about our approach. Animals should always be greeted with a quiet voice and a slow approach. Avoid making eye contact and stand sideways to the animal, looking at them using your peripheral vision. Never bend over them
at the waist and reach your hand over their heads. Allow dogs to step forward and sniff you but do not immediately reach to pet them. Many people mistakenly believe that when a dog approaches and investigates you that it is ready to be petted. This is not necessarily so! Many dogs just want to investigate and have no interest in being petted by a stranger. Waiting until they show an increased interest in you and preferably even press or rub their body against you is safest. When you do reach to pet the dog, you should avoid reaching over its head but instead reach to its side and gently rub or scratch its shoulder. If the dog remains standing near you and acts as if it is enjoying the interaction, then you can gently bring your hand up and rub or scratch their neck. You can also reach up from below and rub or scratch the ears as long as the dog is not being presented for an ear infection! A similar approach should be made to the cat, avoiding direct eye contact or reaching for them suddenly.

Using Pheromones in The Clinic

Appropriate use of pheromones is an easy way to aid in keeping your practice pet friendly. Pheromones are semiochemicals that evolved as a signal between organisms of the same species that elicit a particular reaction from the receiver. The term semiochemical simply refers to any of the chemicals used by animals for communication. The word “semio” taken from the Latin means “sign”. Semiochemicals have evolved over thousands of years to enable animals to communicate within their species and between species. Olfactory cues or odors may also serve as semiochemicals, but in many cases they did not evolve to serve the function of communication between species. One of the most important differences to be aware of when thinking about semiochemicals and the pheromones is that pheromones are innate cues which do not require learning. When an animal is born, it is born having the genetically predetermined, physiological capability of responding to the semiochemicals that are appropriate to its species. When a puppy is born and it snuggles against its dam’s teats and perceives the canine appeasing pheromone for the first time, it immediately begins to feel calm and relaxed. Conversely, olfactory cues are cues that are affected by our experiences. For example, if your favorite grandmother wore a particular perfume, every time you smell that perfume, you might experience a sense of well-being, as you remember pleasant times with your grandmother. However, if you had an irritable, demanding school teacher that wore that identical perfume and frequently gave you bad grades or complained about your school work or behavior, then the smell of that very same perfume might make you feel very uncomfortable whenever you smelled it. This is a very important difference between pheromones and olfactory cues! The puppy will never feel differently when exposed to appeasing pheromone, regardless of the experiences it might have in its presence and regardless of its age of weaning or whether or not it was even reared by its own mother. An animal’s responses to the pheromones specific to its species are innate or “hard wired”. Olfactory cues, or odors, require learning.

Semiochemicals, as opposed to olfactory cues, are perceived primarily through the vomeronasal organ or VNO (also more commonly referred to as the Jacobson’s organ). When animals perform the behavior known as flehmen, they are helping to open the duct to the VNO and to increase movement of molecules into the organ. The VNO is a hollow, bi-lobed structure which lies above the oral cavity and has a duct that opens into the roof of the mouth in most mammals (it opens into the nostrils in horses). The inside of the organ is lined with sensory epithelium. When a semiochemical reaches this epithelium, it triggers a nervous transmission to the accessory olfactory bulb via the vomeronasal nerve. From the olfactory bulb, messages are then sent directly to the amygdala, the area of the brain primarily responsible for emotions such as fear and anxiety. Feliway Classic®, Feliway Multicat® and Adaptil® are synthetic analogues of naturally occurring pheromones. Feliway Classic® is an analogue of the F3 fraction of the feline facial pheromone. This is one of the pheromones cats leave behind when they rub their face on items in the
environment. It is best described as a territorial safety cue, likely helping them feel more comfortable about their surroundings. Adaptil® and Feliway Multicat® are appeasing pheromones. These pheromones are produced by the lactating bitch and queen respectively during the period shortly after birth until weaning and likely helps with the bonding process. Several different studies have demonstrated that Adaptil® and Feliway Classic® can decrease signs associated with fear and anxiety in the veterinary and kennel setting. Thus far, the feline appeasing pheromone has only been studied in multicat households with intercat conflict but hopefully, continuing research will demonstrate other potential uses.

Pheromones are species-specific, so they can be used at the same time in the same locations. Diffusers can be used in exam rooms, waiting areas, kennels, treatment and recovery areas. Pheromone sprays can be applied to mats for use on tables and scales, towels for handling, bedding for recovery and even muzzles, e-collars, and the scrubs and lab coats of the staff. These sprays are in an alcohol base so it is critically important that you allow the alcohol to dissipate prior to exposing it to the pet. This can take anywhere from 3-5 minutes. The sprays last 4-5 hours once applied to fabrics and other surfaces so I recommend that staff routinely spray items they suspect they may need twice daily (first thing in the morning and again at lunch time) so that the items are ready for immediate use.

Bear in mind that the goal is to keep the pheromone in front of the animal as much as possible. Pheromone perception is an "all or nothing" type of response, similar to triggering the firing of any nerve, so keeping the pheromones in front of the animal ensures that they are constantly receiving that calming message. The sensory systems of the animal in the clinic are being bombarded with hundreds of other messages telling them they are in trouble; they are in a dangerous place! In order to increase the chance that the calming signal will over ride all of those other messages, the pheromones need to be constantly available. Ideally, you want to keep anxiety levels from climbing rather than ever be forced to have to bring them down after they have climbed to very high levels. As you can imagine, this is a big job and it is more difficult for some animals than others, depending on their personality, their age and their prior experiences in veterinary hospitals.

Use Food to Change the Way the Pet Feels About the Visit

Recognizing the earliest stages of anxiety in your patients is the first step, but changing the way they feel about the visit is the next step and the easiest way to do that is with food. An animal that is extremely distressed will not eat; conversely, when an animal is eating, they are in a mental state that is incompatible with fear and anxiety. By offering food to an animal the entire time they are in the clinic situation, you can change their feelings about the clinic from one of fear and trepidation to one of pleasure. In order to be prepared for every animal’s needs and preferences, you must have a variety of foods available. These must be primarily chewy, meaty and soft items. Consider, chewy liver treats, turkey hot dogs, canned tuna, anchovy paste, low fat deli meats and beef, lamb, beef or chicken baby foods. You also need items that can be easily licked because many animals will lick when they will not chew. These items may include cream cheese, canned whipping cream, peanut butter, canned cheese and semi-frozen chicken broth. For animals with allergies, you can keep some chopped apples and carrots handy or fruit baby foods. Mini marshmallows are another excellent treat for animals with allergies because they are pure sugar!

If a dog is not being presented for an anesthetic procedure, food should be offered the moment it walks into the waiting area. Food should again be presented when it is moved into the exam room. Pieces of food can be used like a trail of bread crumbs to get a dog to go where you wish it to without having to be tugged, carried or otherwise forced to the location you need it to go. Throughout every step of the
procedure, small bites of food should be placed in front of the animal so that it stays busy eating and somewhat distracted during any procedures being performed. Once the food favored by the animal is identified, it should be offered immediately before and during every procedure. Note that we are not rewarding or reinforcing the animal for good behavior! We are classically conditioning the animal to view the veterinary visit as a wonderful thing. These are two different forms of learning. To do this we simply have to associate every aspect of the visit with wonderful food! If the animal stops eating, the procedure must be stopped and backed up if possible, to the last point where the animal would eat. If the animal will begin eating again, then that stage of the procedure can be “practiced” repeatedly while feeding the animal and then attempts can be made to move forwards again. For example, if preparing to take blood from a vein, you might begin by stroking the leg while feeding the animal. Then, hold off the vein. If the animal quits eating when you begin to hold off the vein, then you go back to just stroking the leg for a while. Once the animal will eat while holding off the vein, then you might begin palpating the vein, then attempt to draw the blood, etc. until the process is completed. This may take a few minutes longer but when you are finished, your patient will be far more likely to allow a blood draw next time it visits the clinic than it would if you simply restrained the animal with it struggling and fighting.

**Improving the Sensory Experience**

One way to decrease stress in your practice is to be aware of all of the other sensory stimuli that may be distressing. Sound should be kept as low as possible in the clinic, so staff may need to be reminded occasionally to keep their voices as low as possible. This may take some time to become a habit but many people seem to forget how loud a veterinary clinic can be, especially in treatment or ICU, and of course in kennel areas. Much of the diagnostic equipment in a veterinary clinic can produce noise and frequently it is in the higher range that dogs can hear while seeming relatively benign to us. Care should be taken to keep diagnostic equipment as far from the ICU cages as possible.

Lights should be kept as low as reasonably possible as well, especially in exam rooms. Once animals are removed to a cage in the ICU/treatment area, you can give them bedding that they can snuggle down into and place a towel or blanket over the front of the cage. For cats, especially, it is critical that they have a place to hide. A deep bed, or most ideally a cardboard box, can be provided to help them feel safe. Studies have demonstrated that when cats are unable to hide, their stress level and subsequently their sensitivity to infectious disease increases.

It is an established fact that safety and security are the most important basic needs of all living things. When you place an animal on a slippery table, you immediately take away any feelings of safety or security. Whether the animal freezes or struggles due to its discomfort does not matter; it is still learning that the veterinary clinic is a scary place.

There are a variety of different, easy, safe and inexpensive ways to provide animals with a non-slip surface on your exam table. For small animals a towel may be all that is necessary. A number of small, non-slip bathmats can also be acquired from discount stores and a different one used for each pet. These can then be washed and re-used as needed. There is also a commercially available non-slip mat for use in veterinary clinics called the Pet Vet Mat™. This mat has a non-slip backing and is made of a heavy plasticized material that can be cleaned between patients using your standard germicidal agents. These are relatively inexpensive and available online at PetVetMat.com. Non-slip mats on the exam table are a “must” if you and your practice are trying to practice in a Fear Free™ manner. Many people like the response that most animals have when put on a slippery stainless-steel table; they freeze. However, as you have learned, freezing may make our job easier, but the pet is still having a traumatic experience...
and learning that the veterinary clinic is a frightening place to be. Next time the animal is put on that table its response may be different. It may escalate its aggression based on the learning experience it had previously.

Conclusion

Putting in the effort today to ensure that your patient has a pleasant visit should be seen as an investment in the future of that pet’s health care. Every pleasant visit increases the chance that on the next visit the animal will be tractable and a pleasure to handle rather than a patient you dread seeing. Every tractable, happy patient is likely attached to a happy owner who will be loyal to your clinic because you cared enough to treat their pet with kindness and respect. Every happy, loyal owner is likely to give their pet the best quality health care; the type that you are providing!

Useful Resources

Fear Free℠ Certification program- www.fearfreepets.com


Horwitz D. The Blackwell Five Minute Behavior Consult.