

Was Your Adopted Pet Abused? Here's How to Help Them Cope

Many pets in shelters, rescues, and even adoptive homes have suffered some type of trauma, either physical abuse, lack of proper care, punishment, isolation, or neglect. The telltale signs to look for, 5 ways to create a secure, loving environment, and more.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Unfortunately, many pets in shelters, rescues, and new adoptive homes were abused at some point in their lives. Animal abuse takes many forms, including physical assault, neglect, taking a puppy or kitten away from its mother too soon, restraining an animal by tying it up or confining it to a cage, and lack of appropriate care
- Abused animals are often withdrawn, distrustful, and depressed. A particularly sensitive animal may cower in a corner, unwilling to venture further into her environment
- Rehabilitating a previously abused pet requires patience and realistic expectations. Providing a stable, calm environment, and protection from fear triggers are essential to building confidence and trust in your pet
- Desensitization combined with counter-conditioning are the next step after an abused pet is stabilized

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Sadly, many animals, including family pets, are victims of abuse at some point in their lives. Abuse can be active in the form of physical attacks or punishment, or it can be passive, for example, neglect. In fact, abuse comes in many forms, including:

- Depriving a young animal of its mother through too-early weaning
- Chaining or tying up an animal or forcing it to spend most of its time in a kennel or cage; causing chronic stress or pain
- Yelling, hitting or other forms of verbal or physical punishment
- Lack of proper care in feeding, grooming, and attending to health needs
- Partial or complete social isolation; lack of appropriate learning experiences

Depending on how old the pet is when the abuse occurs, it can affect him for the rest of his life, even if he's taken away from his abuser and adopted into a loving home.

According to world-renowned veterinary behaviorist Dr. Nicholas Dodman, writing for PetPlace:

*"An older animal may bounce back from a bad situation, but a young, impressionable pet will show lasting mental scars. He or she often has to be coaxed out of a shell of resistance and will likely never be fully trusting."*¹

Was My Adopted Pet Abused? What to Look for

Pets who have been abused are easy to spot if you know the signs. They are very often withdrawn, distrustful, depressed, physically inactive, and unwilling to play. A particularly sensitive abused animal will be off in the corner of the room or in a hiding place, too insecure to even explore her environment. Often the fear extends to the outdoors and open spaces. Many abused pets are hyper-vigilant, tend to isolate themselves, and make very little noise.

Other signs of mistreatment depend on the type of abuse or neglect the animal has endured. For example, a young pet who has spent much of his time alone may exhibit extreme separation anxiety when separated from his new adoptive guardian.

If kitties aren't exposed to people during their first seven weeks, they develop a permanent distrust of humans. Cats that have been frightened or physically hurt during those seven weeks may develop generalized hostility that cannot be overcome.

Creating a Safe Environment for a Previously Abused Pet

If you know or suspect your pet was abused in a former life, the first thing you should do is set some realistic goals – for her and for you. Take care not to: 1) expect an overnight change in your furry companion, or 2) expect a complete turnaround.

It takes time to help an abused pet learn to look at the world differently and develop trust in humans again. With knowledge, hard work and commitment, a previously abused animal can be transformed into a much-loved member of your family... but she can't be reborn. It's important to always remember that.

Here are some general guidelines for creating a safe environment for a previously abused pet:

- Make him feel loved and needed; communicate clearly with him
- Do not force anything on him under any circumstances – allow him to adapt to his new family and life at his own pace. Provide him with his own safe place where he can be alone when he feels like it
- Protect him from whatever he fears
- Create opportunities for him to be successful and build confidence
- Feed him a balanced, species-appropriate diet and make sure he gets plenty of physical activity, including 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise each day. The form of exercise may need to be adapted so your pet feels safe.

Additional Steps to Stabilize Your Pet in a New Environment

- Speak in low tones around your new pet, including when you're giving training commands. This goes for everyone in the household. Don't shout at or around your pet. Dogs and cats are extremely sensitive to the tone of human voices, and it is very likely that yelling will be a trigger for a previously abused pet.
- Spend some quiet time each day with your new pet. Pick a room both of you are comfortable in, bring a supply of irresistible treats, and close the door behind you. Read a book or engage in some other quiet activity, and every few minutes put a treat near your pet. Any interaction he has with you or the treat gets rewarded with another treat. When he snatches up the treat or makes even the smallest move in your

direction, consider it progress. Make time for these quiet one-on-ones with your pet each day to build his confidence and trust in you. Let him set the pace. Don't try to rush things.

- If your dog or cat is fearful of unfamiliar people or other animals, protect her from forced interactions with them. There may come a time when she can better tolerate such exchanges, but it's counterproductive to force them on her before she's ready.
- Dr. Dodman suggests engaging in a "reverse dominance" program, "in which your pet has everything he wants and needs for free. Do not make him work for food, praise, toys or your attention. These should always be available at no cost."²
- Dr. Dodman also recommends clicker training to build your pet's confidence. His theory is that clicker training empowers your pet because she has the opportunity to find a way to make you click and thus receive a reward.

After Stabilization Comes Desensitization

When your pet is well along the healing path you've laid out for him, it's time to initiate rehabilitation in the form of desensitization. Dr. Dodman calls desensitization "the behavioral equivalent of homeopathy." It involves introducing a little bit of what bothers your pet, gradually and under close supervision.

Desensitization of your pet might be controlled exposure to strangers or dogs, or being left alone if separation anxiety is a problem. Desensitization is best performed along with counter-conditioning, which associates the fear triggers with a positive response, typically food.

Rehabilitating an abused pet presents a significant challenge, because these animals have been exposed to negative things they can't "unlearn" despite your best efforts. But it's important to feel hopeful, because wonderful turnarounds do happen, and there's nothing more gratifying.

If you've rescued a previously abused pet or are considering adoption, I highly recommend a program called A Sound Beginning, which was lovingly and expertly designed to help rescue dogs and adoptive guardians learn to communicate effectively and form an unbreakable bond.

Many abused animals have behavior issues that may not be immediately apparent. If notable issues continue to surface or you're having trouble helping your pet make the positive changes you'd hoped for, consider working with a veterinary behaviorist. Additionally, working with a holistic practitioner that can suggest appropriate homeopathics, flower essences, and essential oil blends, may help facilitate positive feelings, emotions, and behavior changes sooner than expected.

Sources and References

[Pet360](#)

^{1,2} [PetPlace](#)
