

# What Your Vet Should Never Do if Your Pet Is Fearful

Your pet forms memories of stressful events that can powerfully affect his behavior long term and even his health and mental well-being. How to react to and handle stressful events to minimize the trauma on your pet. Plus, the one thing to speak up about if this happens in your vet's office.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- It's important to be aware of the ramifications of fear, anxiety and phobias on your pet's physical and mental well-being
- Traumatic experiences, such as spending time in an animal shelter, can contribute to a pet's chronic fear or anxiety, but it's also thought that extreme shyness resulting in anxiety or fearfulness may be an inherited trait
- There are a variety of methods that may help your pet to overcome the fear or at least react less severely to the trigger
- One option is distraction using a reward. Ask your dog to perform a command or trick she knows and reward her if she does it
- Desensitization is another option that involves exposing your dog to the stimuli in order to try to desensitize your dog

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Most pet owners are all-too-familiar with the fear and stress pets experience when they're taken to see the veterinarian. Your cat may hide at the mere sight of her carrier, and your dog may stop in her tracks and refuse to walk in the door.

Unfortunately, it's the rare pet that's not unnerved by the strange smells, sights and sounds — and possibly unpleasant memories — at the vet.

In an intriguing article published in DVM 360, Dr. Valarie V. Tynes, of Premier Veterinary Behavior Consulting in Texas, suggests it may not be enough to simply accept the fact that pets coming into a veterinarian's office will be fearful.

Some zoos, for instance, have moved toward training animals to receive medical care, which lessens the need for restraint and sedation, sometimes-necessary techniques that may only add to the animal's trauma.

Your pet is also likely to encounter stressful or fearful situations at home, which is why it's important to be aware of the ramifications of fear and other negative emotions on your pet's physical and mental well-being.

## Amazing Work Bridging the Communications Gap Between Humans and Other Species

Lara Joseph of [The Animal Behavior Center](#) is doing amazing work serving as an "interpreter" between animals and people.

The center provides educational workshops for companion animal owners and caretakers, zoos, wildlife educators and others who are interested in building a close relationship with animals. Joseph explained:

*"I focus a lot of my training on getting an animal ready to go to the vet because I want this to be a pleasant experience for them. The training begins with the crate and I make sure all animals look forward to going into the crate.*

*To prepare for the veterinarian's office, I train them to station, get all feet on a rug and to stay still. This helps tell the animal where to go and stay. Once on their station, I then train a head target, meaning touch their forehead to my hand and stay still while the veterinarian does the body exam.*

*With the giraffe, if they develop a problem with their legs or feet, it can be detrimental to them so I prepare them for veterinarian inspections for preventative measures.*

*Puzzles is in the beginning stages of learning a foot target. I am training him to put his front right foot on a block in preparation for a leg and hoof inspection requested by the veterinarian.*

*He is also trained to accept a jugular blood draw with a neck target. All of these examples give the animal choice, the opportunity to earn reinforcement, and it lets him know what to expect.*

*It is a clear line of communication for and with them and this type of training really builds a strong, trusting relationship with the animal."*

## Challenges with Fearful Pets at the Vet and at Home

At the vet, gentle handling and helping to reduce fear in animals is important in order to recognize pets that may need help for severe fear or anxiety. If the "normal" state at the vet is fearful and anxious, then it's difficult to diagnose a dog or cat that's abnormally fearful or anxious.

A fearful animal is also unlikely to display the same illness symptoms she did at home, making diagnosis even more difficult. And stress has physical effects that may alter test results due to your pet's heightened stress response. Meanwhile, Tynes pointed out that memories formed during stressful events may be especially vivid to your pet and may affect her behavior in the long term:<sup>1</sup>

*"Animal caretakers need to be aware that when an animal is under stress, the memories of any events occurring during that time will be very powerful, and our behavior when handling them may have long-standing consequences for our future ability to handle the animal."*

At home, this means that the way you handle a stressful situation may make your pet's future responses to it better or worse. For instance, if your pet is fearful of loud noises and you leave her outdoors during a fireworks show, the next time she hears a loud noise she may panic.

On the other hand, if you keep your pet safely indoors with a TV on for background noise and some calming essential oils diffused into the air, she may react more favorably to future noise. When fear or anxiety is unrelenting, they can lead to chronic stress that's dangerous for your pet's health and mental well-being.

## **If Your Dog Freezes at the Vet, Your Veterinarian Should Not Do This**

If a dog is frightened, she may freeze on the veterinarian's floor or exam table. If your vet continues to restrain or otherwise engage in activities that feel threatening to your pet, it teaches your pet that freezing isn't working. In response, she may try a new strategy on your next visit, including struggling or even showing aggression. So what should your veterinarian and staff do when a dog shows signs of fear? As Tynes puts it:

*"Veterinarians and veterinary staff should be cognizant of a fearful, compliant animal and attempt to make the visit as pleasant as possible by moving slowly, handling the animal extremely gently with a minimum of restraint, talking quietly, and plying the patient with special food treats before, during, and after the appointment"*

*"... Animals whose appointment ends with a pleasant, positive experience are more likely to leave with that pleasant memory rather than a powerful memory of a fearful experience."*

## **Some Animals Are Born Fearful or Anxious**

While traumatic experiences, such as spending time in an animal shelter, can certainly contribute to a pet's chronic fear or anxiety, it's thought that some pets may be born this way — extreme shyness resulting in anxiety or fearfulness may be an inherited trait. In the case of chronic anxiety, for instance, your pet may show the following signs and symptoms when exposed to a perceived stressful event:

- Increased heart rate, blood pressure and respiratory rate
- Dilated pupils
- Hiding
- Acting constantly on alert
- Startle easily
- Lose bladder and bowel control
- Expressed anal glands

A separate issue that many dogs display is phobia. Phobia is an extreme form of fear that results in severe anxiety to your pet. Your dog may have a phobia to thunderstorms, for instance, or even of going to the vet. According to Tynes:<sup>2</sup>

*"Animals anticipating exposure to these stimuli will often display anxiety. An animal's response to actual exposure to the stimuli can result in a range of responses from relatively mild signs of anxiety to extreme panic and even catatonia. Serious injury may occur when animals exhibit such a severe panic response that they chew or tear through doors or windows in an apparent attempt to escape from the frightening stimuli."*

*It is not uncommon for these phobic responses to become increasingly severe with every repeated exposure to the frightening stimulus."*

If your pet displays signs of chronic fear, anxiety or phobia, it's important to address it because if left unchecked, it will leave your pet in a state of chronic stress. This in turn, may trigger a range of health conditions, including suppressed immune function that may increase your pet's risk of infectious and chronic diseases.

## **Behavioral Help for Fearful or Anxious Pets**

If your pet is afraid or anxious, don't simply ignore the reaction until the perceived threat passes. This may make the fear or anxiety worse over time. Instead, there are a variety of methods that may help your pet to overcome the fear or at least react less severely to the trigger.

One option is distraction using a reward. Ask your dog to perform a command or trick she knows and reward her if she does it. This activity distracts not only her but also you, in case you're tempted to inadvertently reinforce her phobic behavior by petting and soothing her while she's showing anxiety.

You can also try distraction using a fun game, treat-release toy or recreational bone to chew on. **Nose work** can also be effective. Use your dog's natural senses to divert his attention, or have fun with Dr. Sophia Yin's Manners Minder. Just keep in mind that if your dog's fear response is intense, you may not always be able to soothe her with food rewards or other distractions. Desensitization is another option that involves exposing your dog to the stimuli in order to try to desensitize your dog.

For instance, using a CD with recorded storm sounds during times of the year when real storms are few and far between may be helpful. Desensitization should be done in each room of the house, because a new coping skill learned in the living room will probably be forgotten in the kitchen.

Counterconditioning involves consistently and repeatedly pairing a negative trigger with a positive one until your pet makes a positive association. For example, if your dog exhibits a fear response each time she hears a thunderclap, offer her a treat each time it happens.

The goal is to condition her to associate a treat with the sound of thunder. The above options may help to relieve fear and anxiety in the long term, but if you're in need of a more immediate solution, you can also try the following natural stress remedies:

- Ttouch is a specific massage technique that can help anxious pets. You can also consider trying EFT to help your four-legged companion.
- Invest in a pheromone diffuser. Species-specific pheromones are chemical substances that can positively affect an animal's emotional state and behavior. There's the D.A.P. diffuser for dogs and Feliway for kitties.
- Consult a holistic veterinarian about homeopathic, TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) and Bach Flower Remedies that could be helpful in alleviating your pet's stress. Some products to use (always in conjunction with behavior modification) include Calm Shen, homeopathic aconitum or Hyland's Calms Forte, Bach Rescue Remedy, Spirit Essence Storm Soother or other similar remedies depending on the animal.
- Calming nutraceuticals and herbs that are helpful include holy basil (Tulsi), valerian, l-theanine, rhodiola, ashwagandha, GABA, 5-HTP and chamomile. Consult your holistic vet about which option is right for your

pet.

The essential oil of lavender has also been proven to reduce a pet's stress response. Place a few drops on your dog's collar or bedding before a stressor occurs if possible, or diffuse the oil around your house for an overall calming effect.

Many pet parents can manage short-term, mild incidences of fearful situations with some of the suggested solutions. However, if a pet demonstrates consistent or progressive phobias or fear-related responses, ask your vet to refer you to a positive trainer or behaviorist to prevent the situation from getting worse.

## **Sources and References**

<sup>1, 2</sup> [DVM 360 August 1, 2014.](#)

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