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OVERVIEW OF FEARS, PHOBIAS AND ANXIETIES IN DOGS AND CATS

What is fear?

Fear is a physiologic, behavioural and emotional reaction to stimuli that an animal encounters. The physiologic reaction results in an increase in heart rate, increased respiratory rate (panting), sweating, trembling, pacing and possibly urination and defecation. Behaviourally an animal will exhibit changes in body posture and activity when afraid. The animal may engage in an avoidance response such as fleeing or hiding. A fearful animal may assume body postures that are protective such as lowering of the body and head, placing the ears closer to the head, widened eyes, and tail tucked under the body. If the animal perceives a threat, the response can also include elements of defensive aggression. Whether an animal fights or flees when frightened depends on its genetic predisposition, previous experience (what it has learned from similar situations in the past) and the environment that it is in (see below). The emotional reaction in animals can be difficult to gauge because animals are non-verbal. However, by observation of body postures and facial expressions it is possible to conclude that an animal is afraid. On the other hand, pets may modify their behavioural responses with repeated exposure to the stimuli if the stimulus has been successfully removed by aggression or if escape has been successful. Therefore what you see at the present time may not be the same as when the problem first began.



Is fear ever an abnormal response in animals?

In many situations it is “acceptable and understandable” for an animal to be afraid. However, there are times when animals exhibit fear when it is maladaptive or dangerous for humans. When animals are frightened they may become aggressive (fight), run away (flight), or stay still (freeze). The response a pet exhibits depends on the pet’s personality, the type of stimulus, previous experience with the stimulus, whether it is on its own property (where it is more likely to fight), whether it is in the presence of offspring or family members (where it is more likely to fight), or whether it is cornered or restrained and unable to escape (where it is more likely to fight).

What is a phobia?

This is an intense response to a situation that the animal perceives as fear inducing. The response is out of proportion to the stimulus and is maladaptive. Common phobias in animals involve noises and places. Phobic responses have physiologic, behavioural and emotional responses similar to fear, but they are extremely exaggerated. See our handout on canine fears and phobias

What is anxiety?

The human definition of anxiety is a diffuse feeling of impending danger or threat. It appears that animals can exhibit this diffuse type of anxiety, often manifested as generalized anxious behaviour in either specific situations (the veterinary hospital, new locations) or in a non-specific way (anything out of the routine schedule or environment). Anxiety is manifested by some of the same physiologic signs as fear, but also may be displayed as displacement or redirected behaviours, destructive behaviours, or excessive vocalization, and may become stereotypic or compulsive over time.

What types of stimuli might trigger fears, phobias or anxieties?

The triggers for these behaviours are as varied as there are breeds of dogs and cats. Animals may be frightened of people, other animals, places or things. Others may only respond with fear or phobia in one particular situation such as toward a thunderstorm.



What causes fearful, phobic or anxious responses?

Sometimes fear is the result of an early experience that was unpleasant or perceived by the animal as unpleasant. If the fearful response was successful at chasing away the stimulus, or if the pet escaped from the stimulus, the behaviour has been rewarded and therefore is likely to be repeated. Owners that try to stop the behaviour by providing treats or affection may actually serve to further reinforce the behaviour the animal is performing at that time. Also, it should be noted that punishment, in close association with exposure to a stimulus might further cause fear and anxiety toward that stimulus. If the owner is frustrated or anxious or the stimulus is threatening, this too will further aggravate (and justify) the fear. Finally should the stimulus retreat or be removed during a display of fear aggression, the aggressive display will have been reinforced.

It does not take an unpleasant experience however for fear to develop. Any stimuli (people, places, sights, sounds, etc.) that a dog or cat has not been exposed to during its sensitive period of development, which is up to 3 months of age in dogs and 2 months in cats, may become a fear evoking stimulus. For example, the dog or cat that is exposed to adults, but not to children, during development may become fearful when first exposed to the sights, sounds or odours of young children. The pet's genetics also contribute to its level of fears and phobias to stimuli.

Phobic responses can occur from just one exposure or gradually increase over continued exposure. In many cases of anxiety, neurotransmitter (brain chemical) function and levels may be altered and contribute to the overall behaviour. Again, learning or the consequences that follow the phobic response (rewards, escape, punishment) may aggravate the problem.

Illness, pain and the effects of aging may lead to an increase in fear or anxiety in situations where there was previously little or no evidence. These changes may change the way a pet perceives or responds to a stimulus. Age related changes in the brain (cognitive decline) or in the sensory system (hearing, sight), arthritis, diseases that affect the hormonal system such as an increase or decrease in thyroid hormones or an overactive pituitary gland (Cushing's) and organ decline (liver, kidneys) are just a few examples of health and age related problems that might contribute to increasing fear and anxiety. Therefore, for any pet with fear or anxiety, but especially those that are intense, generalized, have any other concurrent signs or do not arise until adulthood or older age, a full physical examination and some blood tests if indicated would

be warranted.

Is it possible to prevent fears, phobias and anxieties?

A good program of socialization and exposure to many new and novel things while an animal is young can be helpful in preventing fears and phobias. However, in the phenomena of “one trial” learning, an event is so traumatic that only one exposure can create fears, phobias or anxieties. Socialization and fear prevention for dogs and socialization and fear prevention in cats are covered in separate handouts.

Owner responses when their pet experiences a new situation that could potentially be frightening are important. Calm reassurances, happy cheerful tones, and relaxed body postures of owners help pets experience new things without fear. Bringing along treats and play toys and giving them to the pet when it enters new environments (e.g. veterinary clinic, schoolyard) or when it meets new people or other pets can help turn the situation into one that is positive. Conversely, if you show anxiety, apprehension or frustration with your pet, or if you try to use punishment to stop undesirable behaviour, you will likely make your pet more anxious. Knowing your pet and their individual temperament will help determine what situations you can and should expose your pet to.

How can these problems of fears and phobias be treated?

Each time your pet is exposed to an anxiety, fear, or phobia-inducing situation and cannot be made to calm down, the problem is likely to worsen. Finding a way to control, relax, calm, or distract your pet in the presence of the stimulus is needed to correct the problem and to teach your pet that there is nothing to be feared. A pet's fear and anxiety will be lessened by an owner who is calm and in control. For most cases of fear, behaviour modification techniques, where the pet is exposed to mild levels of the stimuli and rewarded for non-fearful behaviour, are utilized. For low levels of fear or anxiety, especially when the pet is being exposed to new stimuli, many pets will calm down with continued exposure, as long as nothing is done to aggravate the fear. These retraining techniques are discussed in our handout on Behaviour modification – desensitization and counter-conditioning. Consequences that reinforce the fearful behaviours (inadvertent rewards or retreat of the stimulus) or aggravate the fear (punishment) must be identified and removed. Exposure to stimuli that have an unpleasant or negative outcome (e.g. an aggressive dog, a child that pulls the dog's tail) also serve to instil further fear. Drug therapy may also be a useful adjunct to behaviour therapy techniques and may be necessary in the treatment of some phobias.

