

Anxiety and Phobias in our pets

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Many of our pets are fearful of certain situations. Some of our pets can be overly fearful of some situations and others can be very anxious all the time. The goal of this article is to help you understand these fears and if they are affecting the quality of your pets' or your life, as well as the treatment options available to you and your 4 legged family members. Disclaimer: As with treating depression and anxiety in humans there is no one treatment regime that will work with all patients. Often you will have to work closely with your veterinarian to find the right combination of treatments that will be successful with your pet.

Fears are not always maladaptive (useless or counter productive). They are responses that allow an animal to avoid potentially dangerous situations in the act of self preservation. Anxiety is the anticipation of danger when there is no apparent threat. Phobias are an exaggerated level of fear when compared to the level of danger, they tend to be maladaptive. The most common anxiety is separation anxiety, usually when human family members leave the house. The most common phobia is related to thunder storms. These responses are not rational ones, so they can be associated with any and sometimes no apparent situation.

Dogs tend to pant, whine, tremble, chew or scratch things, self mutilate and sometimes can act aggressively towards people or other pets. Cats tend to hide, vocalize, urinate outside of the litter box, and can be aggressive towards people and other pets.

When an animal is presented with a scary situation there are two pathways in the brain to help deal with the situation. The first one is a fast signal that goes to the central brain (lizard brain) that will initiate a physiological response so that we (also animals) can escape (increase in heart rate, blood pressure, dilate the pupils etc.). A second slower signal goes to the fore brain and allows us to interpret the threat and gauge the response that is required. It will then allow the animal to flee or will send a signal to dampen down the first reaction. So this is why when something startles us like a book falling off a table our heart rate increases and we take a deep breath. We don't go running and screaming or end up in a heap on the floor crying. When an animal has a problem with anxiety or phobias there is a problem with one of these two pathways. They either do not work or are working way too much. So the problem lies with biochemistry of nervous pathways in the brain. To treat the problem we need to treat the brain.

We will first go over the all-natural treatment options. The treatment option that works for you and your pet will be the best one. The most natural treatment is behaviour modification. This is an option for specific phobias.

There are certain things that we can do to help our pet deal with the situation in a constructive manner. The most common mistake is doting over our pet when they exhibit this behaviour. It feeds this negative behaviour because when they exhibit it we run and take care of them thus solving the problem. So when a similar situation presents itself the overreaction will bring us running to save them. If this treatment option is chosen it takes a large investment of time and commitment from the entire family.

There are pheromone products that can decrease anxiety in our pets. Feline facial pheromone is a synthetic reproduction of the pheromone that cats will rub around their territory when they feel safe. Yes when a cat rubs up against your leg it is marking you as their safe territory - take it as a complement. It makes them feel safe. Dog appeasing pheromone is a synthetic reproduction of a pheromone released by the mammary tissue of nursing female dogs.

Acupuncture can be very successful in treating some anxieties. Many acupuncture points are closely associated with many nerves and nerve endings. Herbal medications can also be helpful. Many of the herbal medications used to treat anxiety have similar effects on biochemical reactions in the brain when compared to the medications we use for these conditions.

There are many medications that we have borrowed from human medicine that work very well to treat anxiety and phobias in our pets. They are designed to very specifically alter biochemical reactions in the brain. Not every medication works for every animal and not every animal will tolerate every medication. Every medication has potential side effects so these should be discussed with your veterinarian while choosing which medication to use in treating your pet. Some conditions require more than one medication. One that they are on all the time and another we can give just before scary or stressful situations. Most of the medications require 3-4 weeks of use before we can assess if they will work for your pet.

Anxiety and Phobias can be very debilitating for some pets and unfortunately they tend to get worse with age. There are many treatment options available. Book a behaviour consult with us and we can discuss with you the treatment options and together we can come up with a treatment plan for your pet.