

B-23 PROTOCOL FOR TREATING FEARFUL BEHAVIOR IN CATS AND DOGS

Fearful behavior can be either idiopathic (meaning that it developed endogenously and, although it is not understood what triggers it, that nothing happened externally to cause it) or associated with some causal event (teasing by a child or being bitten by another animal). Fear is poorly understood in both human medicine and in veterinary behavioral medicine, but it can be crippling for anyone experiencing it.

In the first 2 months of life both cats and dogs go through periods that have often been called *socialization periods* but might best be called *sensitive periods*. During these periods kittens and puppies begin to explore the world around them. If deprived of age-appropriate experiences at such times, animals may be at risk for behaving inappropriately in those situations later in life. For example, cats that are not handled by people until 14 weeks of age never become friendly or outgoing toward people. Dogs that do not see people until after 5 to 8 weeks of age (when they are first aware that humans exist) may become fearful of *any* approaches—friendly and not—to people. In general, a very small amount of exposure to a stimulus is required during puppyhood or kittenhood to ensure that the animal does not become afraid. A good rule of thumb is that the more nontraumatic exposure that the animal can have, the better. For kittens, being exposed to people from 3 to 7 weeks of age is much more important than people anticipated. Puppies should also be exposed to people early, although they tend to focus more on their littermates than they do on people until they are about 1½ months old.

It is important to give young animals a good start. The "Protocol for Basic Manners Training and Housebreaking for New Dogs and Puppies," "Protocol for the Introduction of a New Pet to Other Household Pets," and the "Protocol for Treating and Preventing Attention-Seeking Behavior" are helpful.

A small amount of fear in unfamiliar situations is good and adaptive. This is what stops us from doing foolish and potentially fatal things. Fear becomes an *abnormal* response when it actively interferes with normal social interaction. It has been postulated that many animals and humans with fear-related problems have an underlying abnormality with their brain chemistry. This should not be surprising and may be why so many of these animals respond so well to antianxiety medication. Some very profound fearful and panic behaviors in dogs appear to begin to be displayed at social maturity (18 to 36 months of age). This also happens during the analogous developmental stage in humans but is currently poorly understood in both cases.

The keys to treating fear include the following:

1. Early recognition of the fearful response because permitting the animal to continually or repeatedly become fearful only reinforces the fearful behavior
2. Avoidance of situations that induce the fear
3. Gradual desensitization and counterconditioning of the animal to the stimuli that have made it fearful
4. Rewarding the animal any time that it does not act fearful

Checklist

- 1. For a dog, practice "Protocol for Deference: Basic Program" and "Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modifi-

cation Tier 1." Only after you have completed these can you begin to work with the specific Tier 2 protocols that are designed to desensitize and countercondition the pet to the problematic situations. The concepts behind these programs can easily be adapted for cats—and cats can be trained to respond to food rewards.

- 2. Until you reach the second phase of the behavior modification programs, make sure that you avoid all the circumstances in which the pet could become distressed.
- 3. If you must expose the pet to something that distresses it, consider using a mild sedative or tranquilizer. Discuss with your veterinarian whether this is appropriate. These medications are not appropriate for every pet but may prevent the animal from learning to become even more fearful. Tranquilizers and sedatives are *not intended* for daily use. They are for occasional situations (e.g., going to the veterinarian) when animals must be exposed to problem situations.
- 4. Whenever the pet is calm, tell the pet that it is brilliant and give it love and food treats.
- 5. Do not tell the pet that it is okay when it is not okay. No abnormally fearful response is okay. Although your intentions are good, you are giving the pet conflicting signals. If the pet will permit it, you can lay a hand or arm firmly on the pet and press, but do not pet the animal or tell it that it is okay.
- 6. Do not try to bribe the animal into not being fearful—it will not work. What will work is to teach the dog or cat to sit for a food treat and then gradually introduce the fearful situation so that the pet learns to associate it with good things. That is the principle behind Step 1.
- 7. Do not force the animal to be in a situation in which it becomes progressively more panicked. Many people think that if the puppy is upset, you should drag it to the thing that upsets it and the pet will "get over it." This concept is wrong—you are making the problem worse. Observe the pet's behavior; if it tries to escape in a more active manner, looks away, pants, shakes, drools, or widens its pupils, the dog is stressed and scared. Remove the animal from the situation as soon as possible, or ignore the pet until it is calm.
- 8. Do not use physical punishment. It is guaranteed to worsen the problem and may make the dog aggressive.
- 9. Warn friends who might interact with the animal how you would like them to interact with the pet. Emphasize that it is important for them to help the pet. If your friends do not comply, separate them and the pet.
- 10. Do not forcibly extract a fearful animal from an area where it is hiding. You may be bitten and this will be an even worse event for the pet. Instead, speak calmly and try to coax the animal from its hiding place. If this is not effective, try leaving a dish of food a slight distance away from the hiding place and just sit there. When the pet comes out, do not reach for it—just talk softly. The animal will eventually come to you. Let the pet set the pace of the interaction. Be calm.

- 11. Head collars can help dogs relax because they do not permit the dog to intensify the fearful behavior. Consider this option.
- 12. Antianxiety medications are not tranquilizers. They do not alter an animal's perceptions by drugging the animal; they act to increase levels of specific neuro-

transmitters. If your pet is profoundly fearful, these drugs may help you implement the behavior modification. Some dogs and cats need antianxiety medication on a daily basis and may need medication for life. This is further evidence that these problems are rooted in brain chemistry.