

Pets Gone Wild!

From thunderstorm phobia to outright aggression, our pets can suffer from a variety of behavioral maladies. Thankfully, modern science has given us new therapeutic tools, like anti-depressants, that appear to help our pets cope with these issues. But, have we gone too far in pushing these pills on our pets?

By: Dr. Jim Humphries, Veterinary News Network

According to a recent marketing survey, about 17% of all dogs exhibit signs consistent with a condition known as separation anxiety. Video footage of pets left alone can show excessive pacing, extreme vocalization and, in some cases, a rampage of destruction. Doors are chewed, furniture destroyed and other pets go as far as injuring themselves on their cage or other objects. Sadly, some owners won't or can't tolerate this sort of behavior and the pet ends up being relinquished to a local shelter and often euthanized.

Beyond separation anxiety, other pets suffer from an obsessive compulsive type of behavior known in veterinary circles as abnormal repetitive behavior. Dogs that endlessly chase their tails, big cats in zoos and even stalled horses who pace tirelessly are all examples of this compulsion. Our pets can also suffer phobias due to thunderstorms and even fireworks.

Veterinarians noticed these pets were behaving similarly to people with mental disorders. Various human anti-depressants and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) were tried to lessen these behavioral issues. In some cases, the medications appear to have a lasting beneficial effect. Now, drugs like Lilly's Reconcile® are commonplace in a veterinarian's arsenal of dealing with behavior issues.

In fact, many owners prefer the convenience of a medication to the hard work, time requirements and discipline of behavior modification. It is not uncommon for pet owners to request a pill despite the fact that the right type of positive behavior modification or changes in the pet's environment might do the trick.

Of course, there are critics who feel that we have focused too much on medicating our pets and not enough on how to enrich our pet's environment. In a New York Times article, Dr. Ian Dunbar, a noted veterinary behaviorist, is quoted as saying that he has never needed to resort to drugs to resolve a behavior problem. Although he acknowledges that pharmaceuticals can help in some circumstances, his main thrust is

that we shouldn't set up pets in unhealthy lifestyles and then rely on drugs to correct it. Sound advice for humans as well!!

Veterinary behaviorist, Dr. Valarie Tynes of Premier Veterinary Services wonders if "we are not putting dogs in realistic, appropriate situations and are we not teaching them how to behave in unusual situations."

Likewise, Dr. Melissa Bain, a veterinary behaviorist with UC Davis has commented that our own expectations of how we interact with pets have changed drastically in the last 30 years.

So, what's the best way to make sure that your family won't experience a behavioral "meltdown" with a pet?

First, realize that pets are not an item of convenience. Unlike video games or electronic gadgets, our pets can't be turned on and off at our discretion. They need a stimulating environment and plenty of activity to thrive in our homes. Owning a pet requires a commitment to the animal's mental well-being in addition to their physical health.

Next, look at your schedules. If both parents work full time jobs and the kids are busy in multiple school activities, who is going to engage with the pets on a regular basis? Pets left alone often are at a higher risk to develop abnormal behaviors.

Investigate and learn about the type of pet you want. For busy, on the go families who aren't home much, an energetic dog like a Labrador or a Dalmatian might not be a good match. There is definitely a genetic basis to certain behavior issues, and some breeds have a strong need to "work". Failure to provide the pet with the proper stimulation and socialization can set them up for potential behavioral problems.

Finally, always consult with your veterinarian if any abnormal behavior occurs with your pet. Some behaviors are linked to medical conditions, so a good physical examination could help resolve the issue. Your veterinarian may offer a referral or you can find veterinary behaviorists at www.avsabonline.org. Another option would be a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists at www.animalbehavior.org.

And, although they are not "cure-alls", there is a place for some medications in dealing with issues relating to our pet's mental health.

Dr. Tynes reminds us that we shouldn't fixate on the "Disney Dog stereotype of perfect pets". For whatever reason, we tolerate less imperfection in our pets, yet we are failing to prepare them for what is a novel and rapidly changing world."