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Low stress handling

We all know how stressful it can be to bring our pets to the veterinary clinic. For some patients it may be so stressful that owners may put off bringing a pet in for care to prevent that pet from becoming overwhelmed. This is especially true for many cats, who don't go in the car or to new places except on rare occasion. As your pet's veterinarian we are just as concerned as you are that our patients are stressed when they visit us. Sometimes they are stressed because they are ill, while other times they are stressed because of memories of past experiences at the vet clinic which may have been negative.

For this reason, many low stress handling techniques have been devised by behaviorists to try to make stressful situations less so. In some cases, this involves providing tasty treats for our furry friends. A variety of tempting treats including soft treats, string cheese, canned squeeze (or Easy) cheese, hot dogs, and baby food are commonly offered. We try to allow the dog or cat to accommodate to the exam room and to us by getting on the floor with the pet, talking softly and offering food. We play classical music in the exam rooms and in the back of the clinic where animals are housed. We have snug fitting clothes called Thundershirts which basically give the dog or cat 'a hug' and make them feel more secure. We also have hats called Thundercaps which cover the eyes and reduce the visual stimulation that add to their stress levels. Placing cotton balls in the ear canals may reduce noise stimulation which can scare or ramp up excitement in some dogs and cats.

For cats, and some dogs, wrapping them in a towel (burrito-style) may provide a sense of security, while other cats may just want to hide underneath a towel to reduce visual and auditory stimulation. The use of calming pheromones is also used in exam rooms and kennels, on bedding and on Thundershirts to calm the brain directly. We also have clips that can be placed on the scruff of cats to help calm them, just as their mother did when they were kittens and she picked them up and carried them around.

Retraining (called counterconditioning) a fearful pet takes time and patience. Sometimes it requires that the owner brings the pet several times just for a treat and some love from the staff with nothing bad happening for several visits. In more severe cases, medications to reduce anxiety may be prescribed early on, and then as the pet is counterconditioned, the medications are tapered.

We also offer puppy socialization classes which not only start the puppies off on a good foot for their early obedience training but also brings them into the clinic for something fun instead of something scary. They learn about exam tables, having their ears examined, their feet touched, their temperatures taken, their skin handled as it

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would be for vaccines, how to get on the scale, the exam tables, and in and out of kennels all while getting treats and positive reinforcement. Having all these experiences in a positive light makes them happy to visit us, rather than being scared.

It has been very exciting for our staff to be trained in low stress handling techniques and we are now a low stress certified clinic. It has also been very gratifying to watch our patients transform from a population of scared animals to a population where many are HAPPY to come in the building, dragging their owners from their cars to our doors.

We do everything we can to make each visit as stress free as possible for every patient. In some cases, this may mean your veterinarian may ask to sedate your pet to get a procedure accomplished because it is too stressful otherwise or we may ask you to come back on a different day after medications have been given.

Things you can do to help: Bring your pet in hungry. If your pet has a very favorite treat or is a picky eater, bring along some of his/her favorite snacks. Try to remain calm, our pets feed off of our emotions, so if you are worried or anxious, they will be too. If your pet is really fearful in the car, pick up some pheromone at the clinic before your appointment and spray the interior of your car or the inside of their crate. Leave your pet in the car and come inside and let us know you are here, or if it is too warm to leave them alone, just call us when you get here. We'll get an exam room ready with pheromone and have a Thundershirt ready to put on before you come in the building.

If you have concerns about bringing your pet in, call us to discuss options before you schedule your appointment. Our goal is to make it easy for pets to come see us so that no one delays care because they don't want to stress their pet.

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