

How To Make Vet Visits Less Scary For Your Pet

Taking your pet to the veterinary office can be a real challenge. Some dogs and cats really hate going to the vet, not because the people who work there are horrible, but because the things that happen there can be, at least from the animal's point of view.



By Kelley Bollen

Animals learn through association, which means that things get connected together in their brains. Your dog knows that when you pick up the leash, you are going to take him for a walk. And your cat knows that when you open the cupboard that contains the cat food, she is going to be fed.

Animals make these kinds of associations all the time. The technical term for this type of learning is “classical conditioning,” but you may know it as “Pavlovian conditioning,” named after the scientist who discovered it. Pavlovian conditioning is powerful, especially when the learning involves a strong emotion like fear. This is what is usually at play when your pet dislikes the veterinary office. Most likely he or she has made an association that it's a scary place because they often experience scary or painful procedures there.

Think about all of the things that happen during a veterinary exam that might frighten your pet – being handled and restrained by strangers, having a bright light shown into their eyes, having a thermometer placed in an indignat location, receiving an injection. Let's face it, a shot is not the most pleasant experience even for humans, and we know what to expect when we see that inch-long needle heading toward our skin. Remember: Your pets have no idea why they are there, and we really can't explain it to them. All they know is it's scary and when animals are afraid, they usually behave in a way that reflects that fear. Some try to hide under the chair in the corner or won't come out of the carrier and others become aggressive – hissing, spitting, growling or snapping at the veterinary staff. The reason this happens is because when animals are afraid, they go into “flight or fight” mode. Their first choice might be to flee but if they can't get away because they are being restrained or cornered, they sometimes switch to fight behavior. This is why they can act aggressively at the vet. Aggressive behavior is an attempt to communicate the emotion of fear and to hopefully chase the threatening thing away.

If your pets have a hard time at the veterinarian, there are ways to help them feel differently and I urge you to do these things so that they are not traumatized by their yearly checkup. This will also ensure that they receive good veterinary care throughout their life.

Using the power of Pavlovian conditioning, you can change the way your pet feels about the veterinary office. Take your pet to the clinic in between their real appointments and have something good happen – like the delivery of extra yummy treats. If they start to act fearful in the parking lot, you can start there. Drive to the parking lot – then give him some yummy treats and go home. On the next visit, get him out of the car, give the treats and go home. Eventually you will work your way to the door and then into the lobby – all



the while giving yummy treats. This process will teach your pet that the vet office predicts good things. Our hope is to override the negative emotions that are already formed in his brain. Do this as often as you can, eventually moving into an empty exam room and then having the technicians and finally the veterinarian walk in and hand him the treats.

The above procedure is not as easy to do with cats, but one thing that I have found helps cats deal better with the vet visit is to make their carrier a place of comfort rather than a predictor of bad things. Often the traumatic event of going to the vet starts at home when people have to chase their cat around, drag her out from her hiding place and shove her in the carrier. That sets the cat up for failure for sure. The best suggestion I have for cat owners is to leave the carrier out all the time with a soft towel inside and surreptitiously toss treats in the back of it so that your cat finds them. Eventually you will see your cat choosing to spend time sleeping in the carrier. Now she will feel safe in it when you have to take her to the vet office.

The next suggestion to improve your pet's feelings about the vet is to prepare them for what will happen during the veterinary exam by doing the procedures at home and pairing them with good things. Additionally I like to pair a word with each procedure so that you can tell the animal what is coming. For instance: Touch his ear, say "ear" and give a treat. Shine a light in her eye, say "eye" and give the treat. Open his mouth, say "mouth" and give the treat.

Like I said before, the fact that they have no idea why they are there and what is going to happen is one reason they are so scared. By doing this, you are not only pairing something good with the handling procedures, you are also teaching the animal what to expect. Then during the exam when you see the vet pick up her penlight to look in his eyes, you can say "eye" so he knows what to expect and then follow it with a treat. Your pet will feel much better knowing what is coming, and if you have done your Pavlovian conditioning well, he will know it predicts something good.

So as you can see, it's Pavlovian conditioning that causes the problem and Pavlovian conditioning that helps you change it for the better.

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