

RACE-APPROVED • 1.5 HOUR CE COURSE

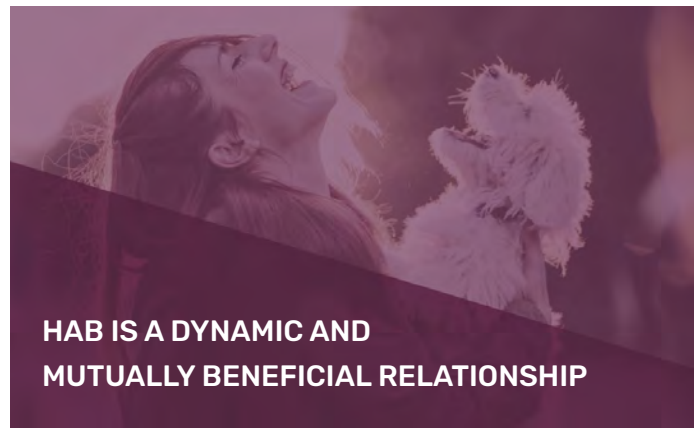
Pet Perception & Communication

and How it Differs from Humans



The Importance of the Human-Animal Bond (HAB)

The Human-Animal Bond (HAB) is a dynamic and mutually beneficial relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This relationship includes attitudes and emotions and the profound physical and emotional interactions among people, animals and the environment (<https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/The-Human-Animal-Bond.aspx>).



**HAB IS A DYNAMIC AND
MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIP**

A GOOD HAB HAS IMPACT ON PEOPLE (PET OWNERS), ANIMALS (PETS) AND THE VETERINARY PROFESSION AS A WHOLE.

- For people, studies have shown that a positive HAB can reduce blood pressure, heart rate and stress and can increase the feeling of wellbeing, social interactions and survival rates from serious illness and memory.
- For animals, a positive HAB is important because it reduces relinquishment and increases overall welfare for the animal.
- And for the veterinary profession, the HAB helps us engage in the profession we love; companion animal veterinary medicine. Pets are considered part of the family and pet owners are more likely to opt for medical and behavioral prevention and treatment, and more visits and treatment means more opportunity for the entire veterinary staff to be stewards of the HAB.

Behavior's Relevance in the HAB

Certain canine and feline behaviors are often the reason people obtain a pet and the performance of these behaviors enhances the HAB. While desirable behaviors may enhance the bond in a positive manner, undesirable (whether normal or abnormal) behavior can create frustration and disruption in the HAB that adversely affects this bond for both the pet and the pet owner.

DESIRABLE BEHAVIORS MAY INCLUDE:

- Various forms of play, both interactive and solo play
- Physical contact; petting, sitting nearby, desire to be in the same room
- Cued behavior such as sitting, lying down or even getting off of the couch

UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIORS MAY INCLUDE:

- House soiling
- Jumping up on people or on unwanted locations
- Vocalization
- Destructive behavior

Finding the Cause of Unwanted Behavior

Undesirable behaviors from the animal can be normal but unwanted (marking behaviors) stress related or learned behaviors (through poor training). A dog that barks excessively may do so for many reasons, perhaps because he is stressed about being alone or he has learned that if he vocalizes enough, the pet owner will pay attention to him.

Additionally, although we in the veterinary health care field understand that undesirable behaviors and/or behavior changes can sometimes be the first sign of illness, pet owners may not. Therefore, any pet exhibiting a change in behavior should receive a complete medical work up first to rule out any underlying medical disease.

PAIN COULD BE THE PROBLEM

Often pet owners don't realize the impact illness may have on behavior. It is not uncommon that a pet experiencing a medical problem that results in a change in behavior, will automatically be

PAIN COULD BE THE PROBLEM (CONTINUED)

assumed by the owner to have a behavior issue. For example, an elderly dog that used to readily play with children may now growl at children that approach because the physical affection from the child actually causes pain. A pet that previously had no issues with eliminating appropriately may begin soiling in the house, indicating they may have diseases of the urinary tract or be experiencing arthritic pain making elimination painful.

The Consequences of Misunderstanding Behavior

The result of undesirable and misunderstood behaviors may damage the bond between the pet and the pet owner. Unfortunately, all too often, this leads to relinquishment, abandonment or euthanasia. In one study, animal shelters reported that 40% of the dogs in their shelter had been relinquished due to behavior problems (*Patronek & Glickman, 1996*).

THE MOST COMMONLY REPORTED BEHAVIORS RESULTING IN RELINQUISHMENT FOR DOGS ARE:	
Owner Defined Behavior Problem	% of Prevalence
House Soiling	18.5%
Destructive outside	12.6%
Aggressive towards people	12.1%
Escapes	11.6%
Too active	11.4%
Needs too much attention	10.9%
Vocalizes too much	10.7%
Bites	9.7%
Destructive inside	9.7%
Disobedient	9%

THE MOST COMMONLY REPORTED BEHAVIORS RESULTING IN RELINQUISHMENT FOR CATS ARE:	
Owner Defined Behavior Problem	% of Prevalence
House Soiling	37.7%
Destructive inside	11.4%
Aggressive towards people	10.9%
Problems between new & other pets	8.0%
Bites	8.0%
Needs too much attention	6.9%
Unfriendly	6.9%
Destructive outside	5.1%
Euthanasia for behavioral reasons	4.6%
Too active	4.6%

Salman et al., 2000

The Fiscal Consequences of Misunderstanding Behavior

Relinquishment is more than the loss of a home for the pet and a companion for the owner, it also has an impact on the economic health of your veterinary hospital because you have just lost a patient.

Research indicates that up to 15% of patients are lost annually due to behavior issues (*Tremayne, 2005*). At an average annual veterinary expense for an individual pet of approximately \$505, you can see the negative impact relinquishment would have on a veterinary hospital.

3500 ACTIVE PATIENTS	
5%	175 PATIENTS X \$505 = \$88,375
10%	350 PATIENTS X \$505 = \$176,750
15%	525 PATIENTS X \$505 = \$265,125

Why Behavior Damages the HAB

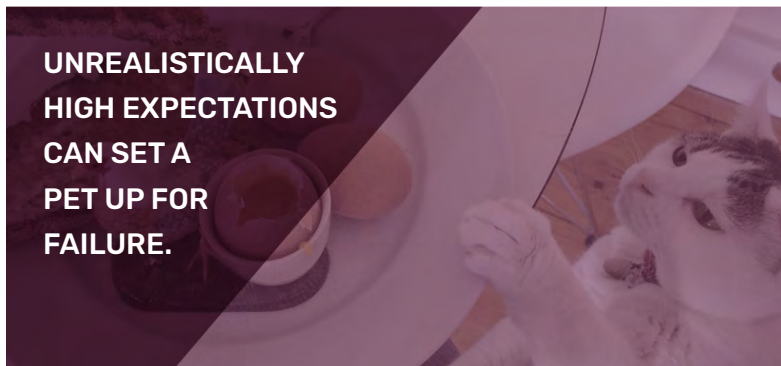
When we explore the sources of undesirable behaviors we often find that the pet owner has unrealistic expectations and the pet is unable to meet those expectations. Many pet owners lack knowledge about species or breed-typical behaviors and what is normal behavior. Pet owners also lack guidance and access to the appropriate resources for assistance when behavior issues arise.

MISCOMMUNICATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

Miscommunication, misunderstanding and improper approaches to training and reinforcement also play a significant factor. Pet owners often misunderstand a pet's body language or are not aware of the animal's innate behaviors. Unfortunately, pet owners are often unfamiliar with

MISCOMMUNICATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING (CONTINUED)

the implementation of positive reinforcement techniques and fall back to punishment tactics. Worse is labeling the pet as mean, stupid, spiteful or dominant. These terms indicate a severe breakdown in the HAB and are not accurate descriptors of the pet's behavior.



Between unrealistic expectations, miscommunication, misunderstanding and a lack of guidance and resources, it's clear to see how behavior can be confusing and difficult to understand and manage and ultimately, negatively impact the HAB.

What Can You Do?

There is more the veterinary profession can do to foster a healthy and strong HAB.

Start by following these five (5) important steps.

STEP 1 – LEARN

As a veterinary professional, you have the opportunity to become more aware and educated about animal behavior and common reasons for relinquishment, as you are demonstrating by taking this course. You can make a difference by continuing to learn about behavior and humane positive management and training techniques.

STEP 2 – ASK

You can incorporate routine questions into your history taking process to discover behavior issues. You can proactively ask pet owners about topics such as:

STEP 2 – ASK (CONTINUED)

GENERAL QUESTIONS

- How does your pet react when it hears a loud noise?
- How does your pet react when a stranger enters your home?
- How does your pet react to being petted?

ELIMINATION HABITS

- How is the house training process progressing?
- How are you house training your puppy?
- Describe what occurs when your puppy soils in the house.
- Describe how you have set-up your food, water and litter box area for your cat.

RESTING AREA

- Where does your pet spend most of its day?
- Describe where your pet is spending most of its time?

ACTIVITIES

- What activities are you doing with your pet?
- How often do you do these activities?
- How does your pet act during these times?

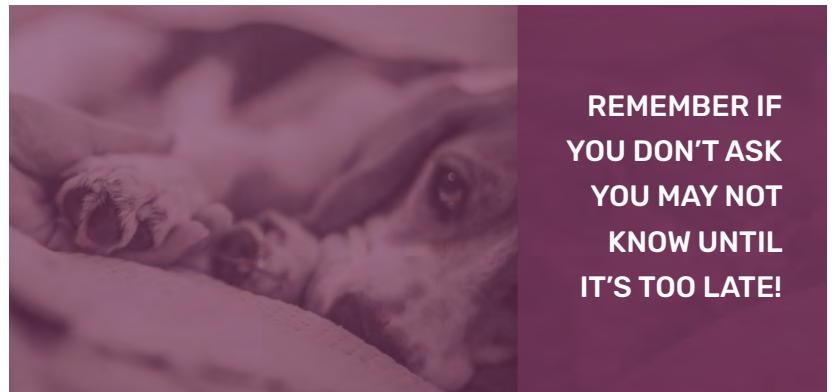
BEHAVIOR CHANGES

- Describe any behaviors that have changed in your pet recently.
- How has your older dog's (or cat's) behavior changed over the past year?

Remember, if you don't ask you may not know until it is too late!

STEP 3 – EDUCATE

Educating your clients and engaging them in the behavior discussion can profoundly change the interactions the pet owner and you have with that pet over its lifetime.



STEP 3 – EDUCATE (CONTINUED)

- Discuss with the pet owner what normal behavior and body language should be for their pet. You will learn this later in the module.
- Discuss with the pet owner what their expectations are of owning this pet.
- Discuss with the pet owner opportunities for socialization and positive reinforcement of their new pet which will help prevent unwanted or problem behaviors. These will be covered in future CE modules.

STEP 4 – PREVENT

The best way to prevent behavior problems is to educate clients about normal pet behavior and ask questions that will reveal issues of concern early, which increases the likelihood of successful intervention and management.

Remember that incorporating low stress handling or Fear Free™ techniques into your hospital helps make the pet and owner feel more comfortable during the veterinary visit. This increases the chances of that pet returning to receive the care it needs over its lifetime.

STEP 5 – INTERVENE

Recognize when a patient may need veterinary intervention or a referral to a veterinary behaviorist.

- Abnormal or excessive behavior
- Welfare of the pet or pet owner is compromised
- Profound fear, anxiety or phobia
- Aggression
- Significant damage to the HAB, as indicated by calling the pet stupid, mean, or spiteful or by falling back to punishing the undesired behavior.

THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND IS CRITICAL TO PET RETENTION AND UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIOR IS THE NUMBER ONE KILLER OF COMPANION ANIMALS!

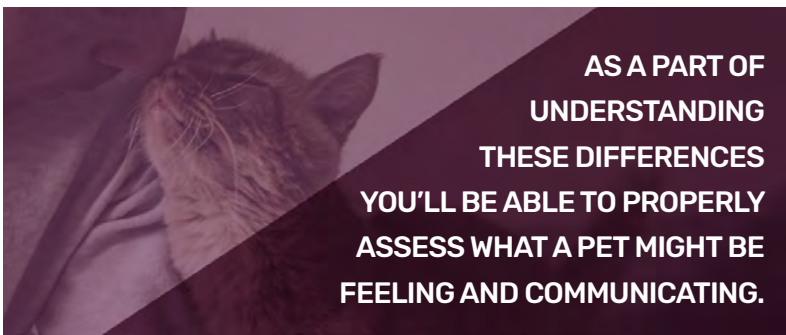


STEP 5 – INTERVENE (CONTINUED)

The human-animal bond is critical to pet retention and undesirable behavior is the number one killer of companion animals!

Exploring How Animals Perceive and Communicate

We all care about animals and through our efforts of behavioral education and prevention, we can often facilitate a strong human-animal bond and keep pets in their homes.



Now, in the spirit of learning and becoming more aware of animal behavior – let's first explore how animals perceive and communicate and how that differs from what we see, hear, feel, smell and touch as human beings.

As a part of understanding these differences, you'll be able to properly assess what a pet might be feeling and communicating. This will equip you to begin taking steps in the clinic to deliver a better patient experience.

Pets Sense & Perceive the World Differently

Sensations are the basic input the brain receives from sensory organs and perceptions are how the brain interprets these basic inputs into meaningful information. Both sensation and perception differ in animals compared to people. It is our job to understand their sensation, perception and communication methods. This will allow us to change our methods of communication for a better interaction with our pets.

VISION

An animal's vision is more focused on movement and contrast. Animals do not see much detail and have better eye sight in low light situations. Changes to our features such as hats, masks and white coats/scrubs can be very unsettling for a pet.

A CAT'S VISION IS MOST CLOSELY ANALOGOUS TO HUMAN RED-GREEN COLOR BLINDNESS.

http://www.kittyshow.com/cat_color_vision.html

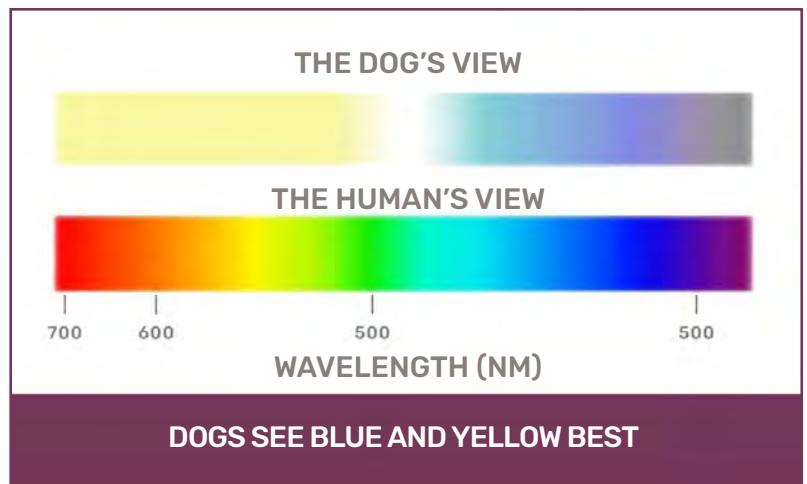
CAT'S VISION

Cats have far fewer color-sensing cells in the eye than humans do. They see less vivid colors. A cat's vision is most closely analogous to human red-green color blindness. Think about how the hospital might look to a cat's eye!

DOG'S VISION

Dogs see blue and yellow best. For dogs, other colors blend together.

You can see that the colors of the toys may blend into the background based on the background color. Have you ever wondered why your dog "loses" a toy in the grass (image below)? This may be why. Consider how your floors, tables and other surfaces might look to a dog trying to navigate the hospital.



DOG'S VISION (CONTINUED)



HUMAN'S VIEW



DOG'S VIEW



HUMAN'S VIEW

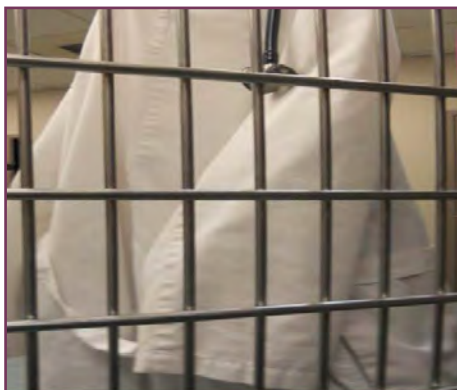


DOG'S VIEW

PERSPECTIVE

In addition to just color differences, think about the perspective from which animals see things and how your patients might see things in your hospital as compared to what you see. In the images below, you can clearly see the difference between human and animal perspectives.

A patient that has entered the clinic may already be anxious and showing signs of behavior change. Now, think about how much more anxious this patient might become after being put into the kennel. Something as inconspicuous as a lab coat can become an imposing figure. The patient is likely becoming more anxious and more fearful based on the strange sights in the hospital.



HUMAN'S VIEW
EXAMPLE 1



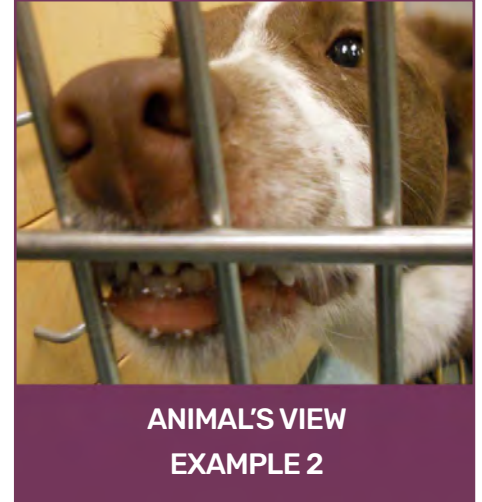
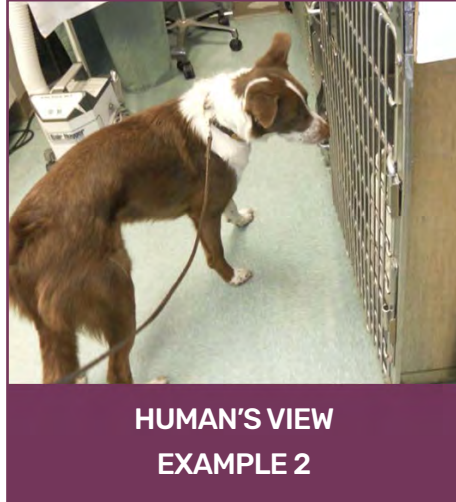
ANIMAL'S VIEW
EXAMPLE 1

Now think about that same animal that is in the kennel with the lab coat right in front of the kennel. As you can see the view from the kennel has opened up (Example 2 - On the Next Page) and is less restricted – but the patient in the kennel has a visitor from another patient.

Images courtesy of Monique Feyrecilde

PERSPECTIVE (CONTINUED)

From the human's view, this looks innocent – but take another look at what the animal might be seeing. Would this create more anxiety and would this lead the animal in the cage to possibly even turn aggressive?



Images courtesy of Monique Feyrecilde

As you can clearly see from these examples, the vision and view from the animal's perspective is very different than that from which we see as humans. This same thought process can be applied in the home environment as well. Visual differences might be causing stress for the pet and yet may not be immediately noticeable to the pet owner. When the pet reacts to those visual stressors, the pet owner may perceive a behavior problem and react in a manner that is not conducive to a positive HAB.

HEARING

WE CAN DESCRIBE AN ANIMAL'S HEARING IN ONE SIMPLE WORD – ACUTE!

Animals hear quiet sounds that humans do not hear and they hear a much wider range of sounds as well. They hear at both higher and lower Hz (sound wave lengths including ultrasound) than humans which means the hearing experience you have in the hospital is much different than what the animal is experiencing.

Think about how annoying the sounds of mechanical equipment, human stress (loud voices) and animal stress (barking and meowing) are to you. Now imagine how that sounds to an already stressed and anxious patient in your practice.

HEARING (CONTINUED)

Think about how those same types of sounds likely exist at home and you can understand how the animals we love may react to common noises that we too find annoying, even though we are only hearing them at a fraction of what the animals are hearing them at.

It is important to understand that sounds we find comforting or as just background noise may be very distressing to our patients.

While we may enjoy listening to heavy metal in the surgery suite, the pets in the recovery ward or treatment area may be hearing something quite scary.

THINK ABOUT HOW ANNOYING THE SOUNDS OF MECHANICAL EQUIPMENT, HUMAN STRESS (LOUD VOICES) AND ANIMAL STRESS (BARKING AND MEOWING) ARE TO YOU. NOW IMAGINE HOW THAT SOUNDS TO AN ALREADY STRESSED AND ANXIOUS PATIENT IN YOUR PRACTICE.



TOUCH

Did you know that cats have a higher density of sensory neurons and therefore more sensitive skin than rabbits? Did you know that their whiskers are specialized sensory hairs? Did you know that for both dogs and cats the paws and areas around their mouth and head are especially sensitive?

Touch can be a very positive experience and influential aspect of the HAB, especially between the pet and the pet owner. However, individuals vary in how much touch they enjoy and tolerate. We must be aware of how frequently we are touching their most sensitive areas while they are being examined or during hospitalization episodes. Ears, eyes, around the neck, toes/paws for nail trimming, etc. are all areas we touch frequently and may be sensitive.

Animals can develop learned sensitivities to any body part and have individual preferences.

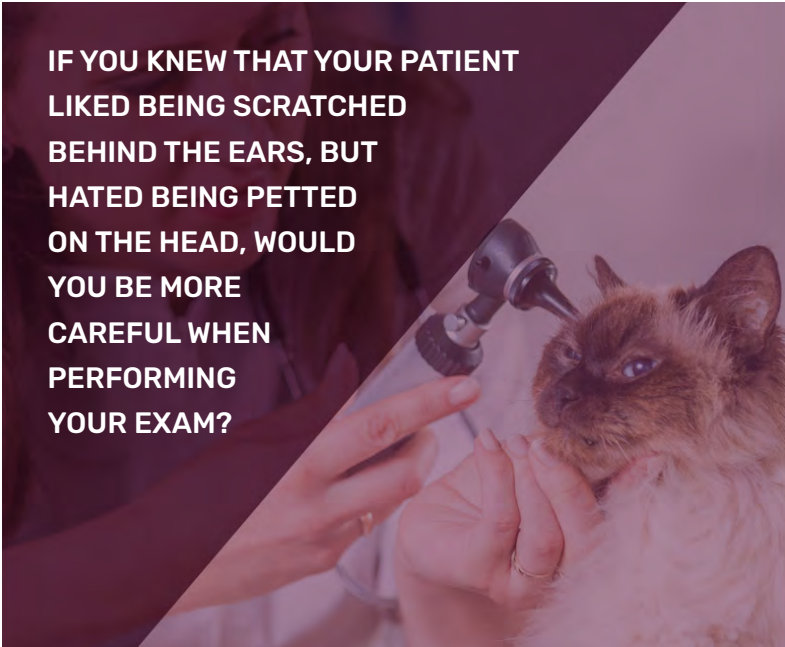
HEARING (CONTINUED)

A pet owner may know that a dog loves to be scratched behind the ears, but hates to be petted on the head.

ASKING QUESTIONS

In step 2, we talked about asking questions as a part of your routine. Remember to ask good questions, such as: How does your pet react to being petted? If you knew that your patient liked being scratched behind the ears, but hated being petted on the head, would you be more careful when performing your exam? In being more aware of the individual patient's sensitivities, would you be able to

lessen the stress on the animal, and therefore the client/pet owner? How can you change your behavior to make this a more positive experience? If the pet and owner had a positive experience do you think that would influence their chance of returning?



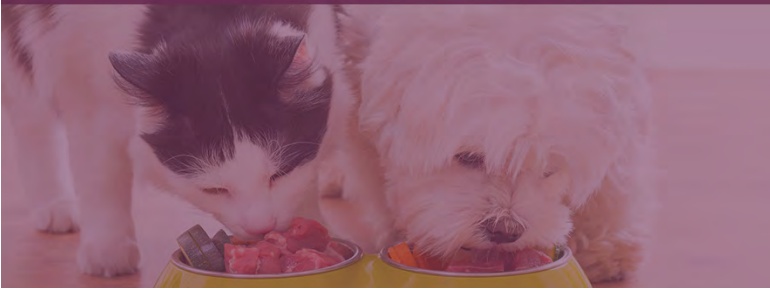
IF YOU KNEW THAT YOUR PATIENT LIKED BEING SCRATCHED BEHIND THE EARS, BUT HATED BEING PETTED ON THE HEAD, WOULD YOU BE MORE CAREFUL WHEN PERFORMING YOUR EXAM?

SMELL & TASTE

Animals have an increased ability to detect smells. Dogs and cats will eat a particular food for the same reason a person would. First, it should have an enticing aroma. Second, the texture or mouth feel needs to be pleasant. And third, it should taste good. These are also ranked in order of importance. If the aroma or texture is off, then taste will not encourage a pet to eat a treat or food. Cats have fewer taste buds than dogs and humans, and limited senses of taste. They do not taste sweet. All of the reasons above are why cats can be very finicky when it comes to this sense and what they perceive to be good or bad.

SMELL & TASTE (CONTINUED)

ANIMALS USE SCENT AS A SIGNALING SYSTEM AND FROM ONE SPECIES TO ANOTHER, ONE BREED TO ANOTHER AND EVEN ONE ANIMAL TO ANOTHER CAN HAVE A VERY DIFFERENT IDEA OF WHAT IS PLEASURABLE WHEN IT COMES TO SMELL AND TASTE.



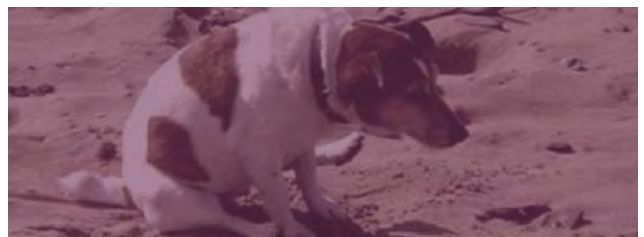
All animals can differentiate smell and taste at much smaller levels than humans. Animals use scent as a signaling system and from one species to another, one breed to another and even one animal to another can have a very different idea of what is pleasurable when it comes to smell and taste.

Thinking about smell specifically, what are some common scents in your practice?

ANAL SAC SECRETIONS

You're probably more concerned about what you think of the smell than your patient. You're probably also very desensitized to the smells. Your patients have a keener sense of smell than people do. Smells from other animals, food, medicine or cleaning agents result in a negative experience for the pet.

In particular, with cleaning agents or chemicals, make sure to remove all traces from yourself, the rooms and surfaces the pet may interact with. Chemicals can actually interfere with the pet's ability to smell, resulting in the inability to appropriately explore their environment.



SMELLS FROM OTHER ANIMALS, FOOD, MEDICINE OR CLEANING AGENTS RESULT IN A NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE FOR THE PET.

TREATS

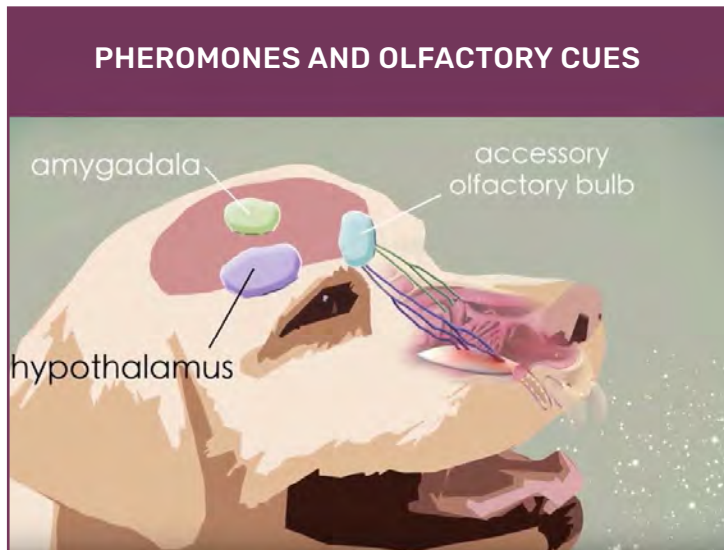
The most common forms of taste in the practice come from medicine and potentially any treats you provide. Is the medicine bitter and could it have been compounded? Can you use a pill pocket to make it more palatable?

TREATS (CONTINUED)

Think about how taste can influence pet owner compliance in giving their pet medications. Providing treats can be a helpful intervention. Make notes about how the pet reacted to the treats in the patient's chart such as: Did the pet ignore them, eat them readily or just tentatively? Be prepared to offer a variety of tempting treats to satisfy any finicky appetite and meet any possible dietary or medical restrictions.



Providing treats is a great distraction and can make the visit more enjoyable, but only if the animal actually likes the taste.



PHEROMONES

Pheromones are different than smells but just as important in animal communication. Pheromones do not have a smell but are often encapsulated in substances that do have an odor, such as anal glands or urine. Pheromones evolved as a signal between organisms of the same species that elicit a particular reaction from the receiver.

One important difference between pheromones and olfactory cues is that pheromones are innate cues which do not require learning and the response to pheromones is unlikely to be affected by learning or experience as is the response to olfactory cues.

PHEROMONES (CONTINUED)

When an animal is born, it is born having the genetically predetermined, physiological capability of responding to the pheromones that are appropriate to its species.

When a cat is exposed to the feline appeasing pheromone, regardless of its age or experience with this pheromone, its response will be similar to any kitten when first exposed to the pheromone because the cat has inherited the receptors for perceiving that pheromone and experience is not required for it to recognize the pheromone.

JACOBSON'S ORGAN

The vomeronasal organ or VNO (also more commonly referred to as the Jacobson's organ) plays a critical role in pheromones detection in dogs and cats. When animals perform the behavior known as flehmen, they are helping to open the duct to the VNO and to increase movement of molecules into the organ and across its receptors.

The VNO lies above the oral cavity, in the hard palate. The entry point to the VNO is a duct that opens into the roof of the mouth. The inside of the organ is lined with nerve receptors. When a pheromone reaches these nerves it triggers a nervous transmission through the accessory olfactory bulb to the amygdala.



Pheromone messages are sent directly to the amygdala, the fear and emotional control center of the brain where they effect change on the animal via effects on the medial preoptic area and the hypothalamus. [Click here to see the video about how pheromones work.](#)

Communication

Now that we've explored how pets perceive, let's focus our attention on how they communicate and what differences in body language, vocalization and specific actions such as aggression and escape can mean. Building on the previous section, remember that chemical cues such as urination and pheromone markers have meaning for our patients.



JUST LIKE PEOPLE, PETS WILL COMMUNICATE USING DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION METHODS INCLUDING:

1. Body language
2. Vocalization
3. Actions
4. Pheromones

In this section we will focus on body language to help you recognize what the pet is trying to tell you.

BODY LANGUAGE

One of the primary means of communication from pets is through their body language. Pets will use all parts of their body to signal to other pets and to people. Remember, pets are not verbal and use the same communication techniques with us as they do with members of their own species. Below are some examples.

EXAMPLES OF BODY LANGUAGE

- **Eyes** - A fixed stare can indicate confidence, a threat or a challenge. Glance or averted gaze can indicate fear or deference, or an unwillingness to interact.
- **Ears** - Laid back ears could indicate fear or defensiveness.
- **Mouth** - Licking, panting and yawning can all be signs of anxiety or excitement.

BODY LANGUAGE (CONTINUED)

It's important to note that signals can change very rapidly and the context of the interaction can affect the meaning of the signal. A yawning dog who is in a veterinary exam room is probably anxious – while a yawning dog at home in his bed is probably just tired.

Body language can be masked by anatomical differences. The wrinkles of the Shar Pei may hide cues that you would pick up on with a German Shepherd.

Lastly, our body language can influence their behavior as well. When we feel threatened we change the way we stand, our facial expression and even our respiratory rate. Animals can easily pick up on this and their behavior will change in reaction to our cues.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

It is not a dog's first instinct to attack others. Their posture escalates with each body signal that is ignored by the other. Recognizing each phase will help you understand the threat level the pet is experiencing so that you can better manage situations to reduce the stress the pet is experiencing.

LEAVE

A pet's first instinct is to leave a situation, if they safely can, when they feel threatened or scared. If this is not possible, as often occurs in the veterinary situation, you'll see appeasement behaviors.





APPEASEMENT BEHAVIORS

Appeasement behaviors are the dog's way of saying "please don't hurt me." Appeasement behaviors include a lowered and/or tucked tail, a dog rolled over on his back or an averted gaze and ears down.

CONFLICT BEHAVIORS

When these signals are not recognized and we continue with our actions, dogs will start to escalate to conflict behaviors. The dog now thinks they are in a fight but don't know what to do. They are still looking for ways to avoid the fight. Signs of conflict can include tense body posture, raised hackles or a fixed stare.

GROWL/SHOW TEETH

The next level is a growl and/or showing the teeth. It is at this point that pet owners will often assume that the dog is misbehaving. Unfortunately, this is all related to miscommunication between the human and the pet. We forget to look at our patient and see what they are telling us. All the signals that the dog has been displaying up to this point have been canine communication to show how uncomfortable the situation is becoming.

SNAP

If growling or snarling do not stop the unwanted encounter, a dog may continue to show discomfort. A dog may then snap – purposefully not biting. This is another warning without engaging in a physical confrontation.

BITING

As a last resort, dogs will often turn to biting. Depending on how threatened the dog is, he may bite without leaving a mark or bite to draw blood. Some dogs can escalate very quickly or very slowly depending upon their past experiences, your reaction to the behaviors, how quickly all this has occurred and the environment and ability to escape. Understanding the escalation of body language can help you better respond to the dog's level of fear and help you better manage the situation and prevent further escalation and possible injury.

CANINE COMMUNICATION

What are the specific body cues for each of these situations that let you know the state of the dog? Remember, it is often important to look at the entire dog.

RELAXED NEUTRAL

Ears are relaxed and neutral, eyes are relaxed.



RELAXED NEUTRAL



RELAXED INTERESTED

RELAXED INTERESTED

Ears are relaxed but forward, open and relaxed mouth, eyes are focused but attentive, body posture is forward.



RELAXED NEUTRAL



STRESSED/ANXIOUS

RELAXED NEUTRAL

Ears are relaxed, body is upright.

STRESSED/ANXIOUS

Body is leaning back, ears are pinned back.

Images courtesy of Debbie Martin

FEARFUL

Body is turned away from person, dog is in a crouched position and trying to make herself smaller and less threatening, head is down, tail is tucked, ears are back, whites of eyes are visible.



FEARFUL



FEARFUL



FEARFUL

ANXIOUS

Has a worried look, his brows are furrowed. This dog is also displaying avoidance behavior by backing himself into the corner and using the owner as a “shield.” He is positioning the owner between himself and the threat. Dog is panting heavily. Dog is practically sitting on the pet owner.



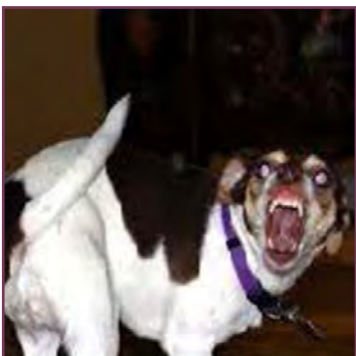
CONFLICT APPEASEMENT

CONFLICT APPEASEMENT

Body posture is crouched and turned away from the person, dog is trying to make herself smaller, dog is licking lips, dog is staring at the person which indicates the escalation of conflict. Additional signs of stress and fear include pinned ears, whites of eyes showing, tucked tail and crouched body posture.

AGGRESSION/PRE-BITE

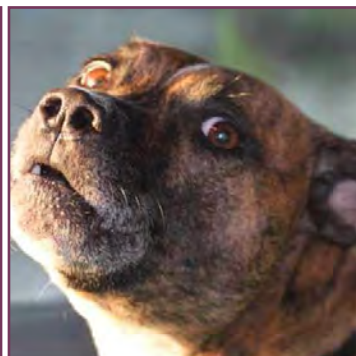
Here are examples of dogs with more obvious aggression and pre-bite body language signs. Dogs are turned away, but with their ears pinned, showing teeth and growling, pupils dilated, direct stare.



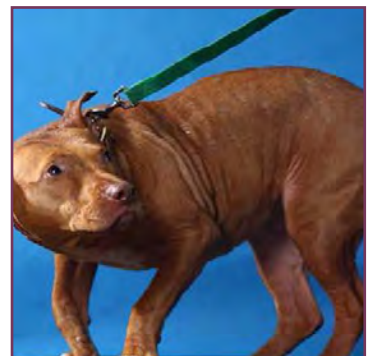
FEAR & AGGRESSION



FEAR & AGGRESSION



CONFLICT & PRE-BITE



CONFLICT & PRE-BITE

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

You may recognize learned helplessness, but probably assumed this animal is just being calm and “good”.

Unfortunately, these dogs are just trying to hide and hope you go away because they are scared! These dogs may allow you to manipulate them, but they are still very much afraid.

The body language is pulled in as the dog is trying to make himself smaller and less threatening. Ears are usually down, the gaze is averted and the tail is tucked between the legs.



LEARNED HELPLESSNESS



LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

When these signals are ignored and the situation not diffused, the next encounter may not go so well. The mental state of pets in learned helplessness is critical to understand. These pets have been exposed to repeated situations of fear and stress. This results in the pet believing that it can no longer save itself from this situation. This type of reaction may lead to unpredictable behavior in other stressful situations.

FELINE COMMUNICATION

Much of the body language is the same between dogs and cats.

RELAXED NEUTRAL

A relaxed neutral cat will have a relaxed body posture, alert gaze and ears at attention. This cat is aware of what is going on around her but is comfortable in the situation.

STRESSED/ANXIOUS/FEARFUL

The “Halloween Cat” is also easy to recognize. Ears are back, back is arched with piloerection. Notice how the cat is turned sideways – to be able to run away easily and attempting to look bigger and more threatening.



RELAXED NEUTRAL



STRESSED, ANXIOUS
& FEARFUL

AVOIDING CONFRONTATION

In this scenario, notice how the cat in the front of the picture has her ears back and the body is more compact. Her gaze is averted and she is getting ready to hide under the chair. The cat in the background however, is relaxed and at ease. Head is down, tail is tucked, ears are back, whites of eyes are visible.



AVOIDING
CONFRONTATION



CONFLICT

CONFLICT

This cat is ready for an aggressive interaction but is also showing signs of wanting to escape. Her ears are back, pupils are dilated and she is hissing. The body is leaning back, however her back legs are stable – she is ready to fight with her front paws if needed.

DEFENSIVE AGGRESSION

These two cats feel the need to defend themselves if attacked. Notice that they are crouched, but the ears are pinned back and the pupils are dilated. These cats are also hissing and ready to bite if needed.

DEFENSIVE AGGRESSION (CONTINUED)



DEFENSIVE AGGRESSION



DEFENSIVE AGGRESSION

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

In the past, these two cats would have been considered model cats in the hospital – you can do anything with these cats! However, this is learned helplessness and they are afraid. They will let you do anything you need to in the hope that you will just leave them alone. Their body is positioned to try to make themselves smaller. Ears are back but not pinned. Gaze is averted. The mental state of pets in learned helplessness is critical to understand. These pets have been exposed to repeated situations of fear and stress. This results in the pet believing that it can no longer save itself from this situation. This type of reaction may lead to unpredictable behavior in stressful situations.



LEARNED HELPLESSNESS



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This section was developed to help you identify body language in pets to better understand how they feel and why they react the way they do. By recognizing the signs, you can help the pets feel more comfortable in their environment and avoid situations that could result in harm to you or the pets you care for.



Summary

We hope you have enjoyed this course. You have learned about pet perception and communication and how it differs from humans. Your increased awareness of these differences can help you better understand what a pet with perceived behavior problems, whether at home or in the clinic, might be feeling and communicating. Knowing this information, you now have the knowledge of what you can do to help the pet owner better understand as well, which will ultimately help the pet and their HAB.

Are You Ready to Take the Quiz?

Congratulations, you have finished the content for this CE course. Click the button below to launch the quiz. If you would like more time, feel free to go back and peruse the content until you feel comfortable enough to continue.

LAUNCH QUIZ