

READING BODY LANGUAGE AND ASSESSING PATIENT COMFORT IN THE CLINIC

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Dogs and cats visiting our hospitals have to contend with new environments, strange smells, encounters with other cats and dogs, physical restraint, and other novel experiences, not to mention procedures and treatments that may actively cause pain or discomfort. Learning how to “read” our patients is one of the most reliable ways to ensure safety, and to improve the overall quality of the medical care that we provide for them.

The first step to success is learning the body language cues that dogs and cats use to communicate with individuals in their surroundings. Most people inherently recognize a “fearful” dog, and this is important because fear is the biggest cause of problem behaviors in the clinical setting. In addition to recognizing this overall picture of fear, it is important to be able to identify the specific body language that these dogs show so that you can monitor their body language for improvement in response to changes in their environment or in response to changes in the way they are handled.

The most common signs of fear or submissive behavior in dogs may include lip licking, yawning, holding the ears back against the head, avoiding eye contact, holding the tail in a lowered position, crouching, rolling over in response to any direct interaction, panting, whining, startling in response to environmental sounds or movement, increasing distance between themselves and the perceived threat, and an inability to settle or relax. Remember that the intent of this type of signaling is to “appease” or “defuse” the perceived threat. Continuing to pressure or force a dog that is already showing signs of fear or anxiety is one of the most reliable ways to elicit aggressive behavior in the moment, or condition aggressive behavior and defensive responses during future visits.

In contrast to the “fearful dog”, we also see many dogs that are comfortable in the clinical environment. Recognizing these signs allows you to observe changes in their body language during times of illness, or when their environment changes in a way that causes stress or anxiety. Dogs typically show relaxed behaviors such as a neutral tail position, relaxed tail wagging with involvement of hips/waist, they are responsive to eye contact or verbal attention, they are non-reactive to changes in their environment, they remain in contact or actively solicit physical touch and petting, they are willing to explore their surroundings, and they settle within a short period of time when the environment is calm.

Some dogs are known for their tendencies to protect their owners or show more assertively aggressive behavior for a variety of reasons. Body language signals associated with this pattern may include strategic positioning between their owners and the perceived threat, forward stance, stiff posture, squared stance directed towards the threat/individual, lack of affiliative interaction, “standoffish” behaviors, tail held over the horizontal plane of their back, or direct/sustained eye contact.

It may be helpful to familiarize yourself with the “Ladder of Aggression” as it relates to canine behavior – this is a tool that can provide guidelines for “safe” interactions, for “caution” interactions, and for “red flag” behaviors. This may be especially important for new or less experienced staff members as you learn these principles and have a chance to implement them on a daily basis.

Cats also communicate through their body language, although they may be more difficult to observe while contained in their carrier in the lobby or at the beginning of an appointment. The fear responses of fight, flight, freeze and fidget are seen in cats as well as in dogs. Cats with a tendency to “freeze” are often easy to handle in the clinic but it is important to remember that the reason for this behavior is fear and they deserve just as much attention to gentle handling and restraint as the other cats in your practice. More active fight or flight responses may include hiding, dilated pupils, refusing to interact, piloerection, agitated tail movements, lowering of the head, wrapping the tail around the body, hissing, swatting, or attempts to bite.

Friendly, relaxed cats generally explore their environment in a confident, active manner, and raise their tail in an upright, relaxed carriage when greeting a person or another animal. A twitching or agitated tail movement pattern, with or without piloerection, typically signals an increasing level of emotional arousal that may predispose the cat to respond aggressively if handled at that moment in time.

Accurately determining whether or not a canine or feline patient is in pain or is experiencing discomfort when they aren't showing obvious signs such as limping, hunching their back, or tensing their abdomen can be difficult. Other clues may include the signs listed for fear and anxiety, as well as watching for any specific changes in the way that a patient responds to their environment in comparison to their normal behavior. Remember that any condition that is likely to cause pain or discomfort may have an impact on the animal's tolerance for handling and the patient may be more susceptible to showing fear, anxiety, or aggressive behaviors.

It can be also be difficult to understand why cats and dogs appear fearful, especially as people go out of their way to help them feel comfortable with friendly human gestures. Keep in mind that forcing interactions, moving quickly or suddenly, squaring shoulders towards a timid animal, leaning over the top of a patient, speaking in loud voices, or reaching out to touch or physically restrain a pet can all be perceived as threat gestures. This tendency to perceive “friendly” gestures such as direct conversation, petting, or cuddling, as threatening is especially in strong in pets with a shy temperament or a history of limited socialization. Providing time for the pet to acclimate to your presence, crouching (when safe to do so), turning to the side, allowing the pet to approach at their own pace, or perhaps associating your presence with toys, treats, or interactive play (when appropriate).

We have multiple opportunities to observe our patients and how they are responding to the clinic environment, from the lobby to the exam to the treatment room and back again. Making a note of their body language and their response to interactions at various points during the clinic may help to isolate the specific cause of fear/anxiety and allow for more targeted interventions during future visits. For example, identifying signs of anxiety or fear in a dog in the waiting area may allow a receptionist to alert a technician to move the pet into a room sooner rather than later.

Similarly, observing a cat's body language and lack of tolerance for physical handling in the exam room may have a dramatic impact on the technique you choose for restraint while collecting a blood sample, using a towel wrap rather than relying on a scruff type of restraint, for example.

The purpose of these body language cues is communication, and the signals change from one moment to the next. Communicating effectively requires an ongoing level of awareness, just the same as you might use when talking with a spouse, friend, or coworker. You could also look at this interaction as a sort of "dance" – one that requires confidence and clear direction without the use of excessive force, while requiring you to be responsive to the changes that you observe from one moment to the next. You have the opportunity to influence an animal's behavior during each interaction – make a point of having a positive impact each and every time and you patients as well as your clients will thank you for it!