

MORE THAN GOOD RECOMMENDATIONS

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Learning outcomes:

- Recognize common client communication patterns
- Navigate issues of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism
- Identify and capitalize on client strengths
- Evaluate physical and social environments for barriers to success
- Practice responses to sensitive information shared by clients
- Empower your clients to take ownership of recommendations

It is commonly asked of behaviorists whether behavior problems are “more about the pet or the owner”. The reality is that it is the intersection of behavior between the two that is at the heart of conflicts, and understanding this dynamic is critical to passing along recommendations that are appropriate for the situation and are likely to have desired impact.

Every client, pet, and environment have unique variables, from the experience level of the client to their specific goals and objectives. Treatment is likely to involve multiple individuals, both from the perspective of the medical/behavior team to the household responsible for implementation. Creation of a working partnership helps to ensure successful outcomes.

Techniques exist for assessing the client’s skill set, starting with the accuracy and reliability of their observations. This is relevant when gathering a history that supports the working diagnosis, and when assessing the patient’s progress through treatment. It is also necessary to confirm the client’s comprehension of the information that is provided, moving beyond absent-minded head nods and casual agreement. If the client will be responsible for implementation of exercises or procedures without the direct guidance of a team member, practicing those skills and troubleshooting together any problems that are encountered can have a tremendous impact on the overall success of the intervention.

Client perceptions may be influenced by patterns of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, respectively the attribution of human characteristics to animals or non-living things or the assessment of reality through an exclusively human perspective. These are important to recognize because they can affect the way the client hears information and recommendations provided and may contribute to misinterpretation of information or lack of objectivity. However, they can also be helpful in generating empathy or when harnessing the client’s motivation to implement the recommendations that are provided.

Companion animals play a variety of roles within the lives of their human family members, ranging from social facilitation, providing a sense of safety, and supporting emotional development of the individuals. Leveraging the human animal bond can be a helpful part of treatment both in terms of improving communication and maximizing client motivations for implementation.

While it is important to recognize that veterinarians and behavior consultants are often engaged in emotionally intense conversations with clients regarding decisions and difficult outcomes, it is also critical to recognize that most professionals are not trained as human mental health providers. Having resources available for referral, and practicing communication strategies that allow you to make referrals effectively and compassionately, can make or break whether an individual is ready to navigate these difficult conversations when they occur. Specific resources include the website www.helpstartshere.org and www.psychologytoday.com/us.

Successful negotiation of treatment may include factors related to:

- careful consideration of treatment options
- communication style of the client
- the specific role of the pet in the household
- body language
- consistency of recommendations and implementation
- discussing strategies for specific issues likely to be encountered
- follow-up guidelines

Clients are often in a vulnerable position when asking for help. In addition to communicating with empathy, remember that the more significant change required for implementation of treatment, the more support the client is likely to need to be successful. It may be helpful to *guide* the overall discussion rather than mandating treatment, and phrase conversations in a way that allows the owner to be an active participant in the treatment decisions themselves. Creating a sense of ownership over the treatment plan not only helps maximize client implementation, but also helps to decrease dependency on the veterinary or behavioral professional in the future.

Asking a client's preferred communication style or using clues such as their profession or vocation as a guide can help you to phrase recommendations in a way that the client is likely to hear and internalize easily. This may range from providing detailed bullet point lists to engineer minded individuals, to phrasing things in more loosely constructed or emotional terms for individuals who may resonate more with that approach.

We often focus on the body language of our patients as a guide for their current mental state, to assess their level of engagement within an interaction, and a barometer to measure the effectiveness of our interventions. The same can be true of our human clients as well! Observing the client's response to what we say or do can help us to know whether we are on the right track.

The way that we respond when clients share sensitive information can have a direct impact on the ongoing conversation. Remember that if the dialogue shuts down, we lose the opportunity to impact future behavior and decisions as well. It may be necessary to practice responses that can be used in a wide variety of situations, so that when a situation occurs, we are ready without having to think about it. Options such as, "and then what happened?", practiced in front of a mirror until they are fluid and natural, go a long way toward maintaining open lines of communication.

Effective communication may also involve helping clients to set realistic expectations for their pet or their situation, based on the overall prognosis as well as their anticipated or expressed level of commitment.

Certain conversations are likely to happen multiple times and with similar themes. Discussions related to use of medication as an intervention for behavior concerns and understanding the pros and cons of options such as rehoming or humane euthanasia are two such examples. While it isn't necessary to have a set script, it can be helpful to have a list of common questions and answers in your memory bank ahead of time so that you can move through these conversations efficiently and effectively.