

Prozac treatment can help anxious dogs

May 14 2015, by Marie Daniels



Dogs who suffer with separation anxiety become more optimistic when taking the animal equivalent of Prozac during behavioural treatment, according to the results of an innovative new study.

Led by researchers at the University of Lincoln, UK, the research has for the first time revealed how the animals feel during the clinical treatment of behaviours associated with negative emotions.

Jess Cook signed up for the study as her dog Lexi would become so distraught when left alone in the house neighbours would complain about her howling.

For five weeks in 2013, Lexi, now seven, took two tablets a day in some butter. She also underwent behaviour management therapy, which taught her to cope better with being separated from her owner.

Miss Cook, who runs Like My Own Pet Care Services in Derbyshire and is studying for her MSc in Clinical Animal Behaviour at the University of Lincoln, slowly built up the amount of time Lexi was left unattended for. It proved successful and now she has come off her medication.

Canine separation-related problems – also described as separation anxiety or separation distress – are among the most common behavioural complaints of dog owners. But the issue of using psychoactive medication to help pets with behavioural problems is a widely debated one.

Treatment with psychoactive medication in parallel with a behaviour modification plan is well documented, but it is unknown if this is associated with an improvement in underlying emotion or mood, or simply an inhibition of the behaviour.

The new study, published in the peer-reviewed veterinary science journal *BMC Veterinary Research*, has thrown new light on the topic with researchers devising a method to evaluate animals' emotional state when treated with fluoxetine – the active ingredient in Prozac for humans and Reconcile for pets. Prozac, the trade name for fluoxetine, is typically used to treat depression, obsessive compulsive disorder and anxiety in humans.

The researchers recruited [dogs](#) showing signs of [separation anxiety](#), such as barking, howling, destruction of property and toileting when alone, and used a special behaviour test to determine if they were feeling 'optimistic' or 'pessimistic'.

In the test, dogs were taught that when a food bowl was placed in one location it contained food, but when placed in another location that it was empty. The bowl was then placed in ambiguous locations, and the dogs' response was assessed to determine whether they expected food (i.e. 'optimistic') or not (i.e. 'pessimistic').

The results indicated that when dogs were treated for separation problems using both a behaviour modification programme combined with fluoxetine treatment that they did become more optimistic, and as their mood improved so did the behaviour problem. The same results were not recorded for the control group.

Research lead Daniel Mills, Professor of Veterinary Behavioural Medicine at the School of Life Sciences, University of Lincoln, said: "For quite a while, I, like many others, have been concerned as to whether drugs such as Reconcile simply inhibit the behaviour and perhaps had no effect on the animal's mood. With the advent of new methods to assess animal welfare, we were able to answer this question and were pleased to see that, when the drug is used within normal therapeutic ranges, the dogs do indeed seem better.

"However, it is important to emphasise that animals were treated with both the drug and a behaviour modification programme - with both being essential for effective treatment. Using the drug does seem to bring about a rapid improvement in mood while the animal responds to the training programme. The reality is, whether we like it or not, there are animals who are suffering and we need to take measures to both prevent the problem but also manage it as effectively as possible when it arises."

More information: "Dogs with separation-related problems show a "less pessimistic" cognitive bias during treatment with fluoxetine (Reconcile) and a behaviour modification plan." *BMC Veterinary*

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