

'Fear-free' veterinarians aim to reduce stress for pets

January 13 2016, by Sue Manning



In this 2012 photo, Debby Trinen, of Sandpoint, Idaho, sits with her black Labrador retriever Joy on a late fall hike near their home. Trinen has taken Joy to a lot of veterinarians over the years, but the visits make the dog so scared she gets sick. Only recently has Trinen noticed any change and that's because she has a fear-free vet who examines Joy on a yoga mat on the floor. (Debby Trinen via AP)

Trips to the veterinarian leave Joy so scared, she gets sick.

The black Lab-mix dog shakes and shivers, her heart rate jumps, her blood pressure spikes, her temperature rises, her eyes dilate and she cowers under anything she can get beneath.

After trying vet after vet for 14 years, the dog's owner Debby Trinen of Sandpoint, Idaho, has finally found relief for Joy's stress from a new approach to veterinary care called "fear-free."

The fear-free movement aims to eliminate things in the vet's office that bother dogs and cats—like white lab coats, harsh lights and slippery, cold exam tables—while adding things they like.

For example, a fear-free clinic "will have a big treat budget," said Dr. Marty Becker, the initiative's main cheerleader and the vet chosen to introduce it to the country. All the dogs and cats at his North Idaho Animal Hospital, where Joy now gets care, have space on their files to note favorite treats, from Easy Cheese to hot dogs.

About 50 practices across the country have gone fear-free, Becker said. Later this year, the initiative will start certifying veterinary professionals. The certification takes about 12 hours of online instruction. The movement hopes to register as many as 5,000 people this year.



In this August 2015 photo, veterinarian Dr. John Talmadge poses with his golden retrievers at Talmadge's Bigger Road Veterinary Clinic in Kettering, Ohio. He reopened his Springboro, Ohio, office, which he transformed into a fear-free practice. He says they designed the new clinic to make you feel like you were taking a walk in the park. (Erin Grote/Bigger Road Veterinary Center for Pet Health and Enrichment via AP)

Hospital certification could start in 2018, followed by animal shelters and homes, Becker said.

Heather Lewis of Animal Arts in Boulder, Colorado, which has been designing animal hospitals since 1979, says there are many ways to make veterinary offices more pleasant for pets. Among them:

— Paint walls in pastels and have staff wear pastel scrubs and lab coats. To an animal's eyes, a white lab coat is like a bright glowing beacon and can be scary.

— Remove old fluorescent lights. Dogs and cats have better hearing than humans, and the buzz from those old fixtures can bother them.



This August 2015 photo provided by Bigger Road Veterinary Center for Pet Health and Enrichment shows the exam rooms at the facility in Springboro, Ohio. To the right is one of the support beams that was turned into a tree. The exam rooms, designed to look like forest cottages, follows the path, with street lamps along the way. (Erin Grote/Bigger Road Veterinary Center for Pet Health and Enrichment via AP)

— Consider alternatives to lifting animals up on to high exam tables with cold, slippery metal surfaces. Some clinics, like Becker's, use yoga mats for animal exams.

— For background music, choose classical. Becker and Lewis like collections called "Through a Dog's Ear" and "Through a Cat's Ear."

A fear-free vet might also use sedatives or pheromones—chemicals secreted by animals that serve as stimulants for many things, including mating—rather than muzzles or restraints to keep animals calm during treatment, Becker said.

"Twenty-five to 30 percent of pets need sedation," Becker said.



This August 2015 photo provided by Bigger Road Veterinary Center for Pet Health and Enrichment shows Buster, who is enrolled in the puppy Montessori program at the facility in Springboro, Ohio. Puppies enrolled in the program get

all the same things as adults, but with particular focus on early development training, behavior and socialization. (Erin Grote/Bigger Road Veterinary Center for Pet Health and Enrichment via AP)

Becker introduced veterinarians to the fear-free initiative at the North American Veterinary Community convention last year. He's presenting version 2.0 at the 2016 conference beginning Saturday in Florida.

Becker, chief veterinary correspondent for the American Humane Association, has written 22 books and is doing the 23rd on the fear-free initiative.

One fear-free center is the Bigger Road Veterinary Center in Springboro, Ohio.

"We designed this clinic to look like you were going for walks in the park," said Dr. John Talmadge. "Support beams look like maple trees. I don't know if we're fooling any pets but the exam rooms look like cottages and it looks like blue sky on the ceiling. It has a very inviting feel."



This August 2015 photo provided by Bigger Road Veterinary Center for Pet Health and Enrichment shows the adult Montessori and day care area at the facility in Springboro, Ohio. Dogs enrolled in the program have several play sessions and individual sessions every day. They also get a nap and snack time. (Erin Grote/Bigger Road Veterinary Center for Pet Health and Enrichment via AP)

He also expanded from 2,000 square feet to 10,000 square feet so he'd have room for better senior care and pain management. And for owners making end-of-life decisions for their pets, the clinic offers a private area.

"There is nothing more important than making that last treatment dignified and calming," Talmadge said.

Becker says the fear-free initiative is important because stress and anxiety cause so many problems for pets, both physical and mental.

"Once pets know fear and anxiety and stress, you can't undo it," he said, adding, "You can see it. You can smell it because dogs are stained with their own saliva from licking themselves. You can hear it and feel it."

Stress and fear can lead animals to hide the symptoms that prompted the vet visit, and may even alter their test results, said Richard A.

LeCouteur, a veterinarian with a specialty in neurology and a professor emeritus at the University of California at Davis' School of Veterinary Medicine.

Talmadge says the fear-free approach is proving popular. "We have more than doubled our business through that clinic since opening (in April) and are well ahead of where we thought we would be," Talmadge said.

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