

Fear Free, Low-Stress Handling- Thank You for Coming. Have a Nice Stay!

**Jonathan Bloom, DVM
Willowdale Animal Hospital
Toronto, Ontario, Canada**

Stress and anxiety are perhaps the most common reasons that pet owners cite for not wanting to visit the veterinary hospital. The Veterinary Care Usage Study and subsequent update indicate that over 50% of pet owners feel that their pet dislikes going to the veterinarian, and that greater than one third of pet owners get stressed just thinking about taking their pet to the veterinarian. Experience and careful observation reveals that those sentiments are not restricted to just the outpatient visit, but also apply and contribute to the pet owner's reluctance to hospitalize their pet. In addition, pet owners are reluctant to approve necessary routine procedures such as blood collections and x-ray for much the same reason. Implementing strategies to maximize patient comfort is the most prudent way to create successful experiences while visiting the hospital. Pet owners visiting my practice have been overwhelmingly accepting and appreciative of any effort to ease their pet's fear and anxiety. My staff are also eager to accept the Fear Free™ concepts because it leads a more enjoyable work environment including calmer pets, reduced bites and scratches, a quieter work environment, and better quality medicine.

While in the hospital, healthcare workers need to pay attention to the signs of pet fear, anxiety and stress, including hiding at the back of the cage, hiding under bedding, trembling, vocalizing, panting, retraction when approached, pacing, and hypervigilance. When we take action to prevent fear, anxiety and stress, or take action to intervene when signs are present, then we create better in hospital experience. The results are more comfortable pets, and safer sample collection. Blood pressure results, blood test parameters, and vital signs are also more accurate and reflective of the pet's true condition.

The pet's surroundings and housing

Common belief has long been that dogs are colour blind. Dogs can however see many of the same colours that humans can see. Fear Free™ has developed a colour palette that was selected to be both positive and visually comfortable. Bright lighting can also be uncomfortable for pets. Dimmable lights are ideal. Cages are believed to best suited for housing when there is opportunity for looking outward with few obstructions, or have the option to retract to an area when less sensory stimulation is present is also ideal. This can be achieved by providing boxes, tents, or partial covers so pets can choose their level of stimulation.

Sample collection

Attention should be paid to commonly performed procedures such as blood collection, urine collection, IV catheter placement and removal, treatment of skin wounds etc. Procedures used to make these more comfortable experiences often include the use of compression wraps, topical anesthetics such as Emla cream, pharmaceuticals, and environmental control.

Radiology

For years, pets have been forced into dark X-ray rooms, stretched out onto hard table tops, placed on their backs with their legs being squeezed by the vice like grip of lead lined gloves, while their limbs are pulled in 4 different directions. There is nothing natural or enjoyable about this for pets. Retakes are numerous, and X-rays are often of compromised quality. Several options including compression wraps, pinch induced behavioural inhibition, or pharmaceuticals are often used to create faster, better quality, more comfortable x-ray experiences for pets.

Post-operative care

Pets often experience stress and anxiety due to the direct result of pain. Careful attention must be paid to regularly assessing and addressing pain relief in our hospitalized pets. Environmental control is also critical in ensuring a smooth, comfortable post-op recovery including consideration given to noise levels, music, pheromones, body positioning etc.

A comfortable hospital stay is not only influenced by the care provided to your patient, but is also influenced by the condition of other pets in the hospital. Imagine waking up from surgery when boarders are barking in the dog ward, or the impact that a feisty cat having its blood collected may have on the pet receiving oxygen therapy nearby. Fear Free™ care involves global consideration of the whole hospital environment and all hospital procedures.

When the hospital culture and environment become low stress and Fear Free™, pets are afforded better quality care, and staff work in quieter, safer, more enjoyable workspaces. Staff become more efficient, more productive, and report much higher staff morale.

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