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Lowstress Handling

Article provided by Sophia Yin, DVM, MS

For more information or to purchase Dr. Sophia Yin's book or DVD set titled "Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modifications for Dogs and Cats", visit the AAHA Store at www.aahanet.org.

Whether you are interested in behavior or not, behavior is a part of every visit. Your ability to recognize the body language of your patients and understand how your every movement and interaction affects the pet's emotional state are essential for your staff's safety. The goal of low stress handling is to create an atmosphere where the pet feels comfortable and understands what you want so that it is willing to cooperate and not injure you or your staff.

"Technician to room 1," you hear over the intercom. A technician disappears into the exam room. A minute later you hear screaming. "Aeehaahehha." It stops for a moment, then again. "Technician to room 1," and a second technician enters the exam room. "Aeehaae" the scream pierces through the entire hospital. After several seconds, the exam door opens and out comes a veterinarian ("Dr. Extreme") carrying a dog pawing at his muzzle, followed by two technicians—one bleeding from a bite. The staff entourage enters the room, where they are joined by a third technician. Now there are three people to hold and one person to trim the nails. "Aeehaa," The screams put everyone on edge until the procedure is finally over.

The entire ordeal has taken 15 minutes, three technicians, and one veterinarian and resulted in one injury. (www.lowstresshandling.com/dvd/videos.php shows an alternate nail trim method.)

Meanwhile the client exclaims to her friend, "That's odd. Dr. Mello only needed one technician during our last visit to help and Oscar didn't struggle."

What's the difference between this visit and the last? During the previous visit, Dr. Mello recognized that Oscar was fearful and adjusted the technique accordingly. Dr. Mello knew that to gain Oscar's trust, it would go a long way to make a good first impression upon greeting and to make the exam room more comfortable by placing a washable throw rug on the floor or a towel on the cold metal table.

When Dr. Mello entered the room, instead of walking right up and grabbing Oscar to do an exam, Dr. Mello first greeted Oscar's owner while simultaneously assessing Oscar's emotional state. Oscar was focused intently on Dr. Mello but would not approach. Once Dr. Mello got down to Oscar's level from the other side of the room and turned sideways instead of facing head on, Oscar trotted right up to take a few treats and solicited petting.



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By greeting Oscar in a non-threatening way and offering a treat, Dr. Mello had put him at ease. On this second visit however, Dr. Extreme reached for Oscar without noticing that this made Oscar duck slightly, pull his ears back, furrow his eyebrows, and lick his lips. These are all signs of fear. Dr. Extreme also failed to notice that as soon as Oscar was placed onto the cold exam table, the dog yawned and moved in slow motion—additional signs of fear.

During the previous visit, Dr. Mello avoided sudden movement. Oscar was relaxed until Dr. Mello handled his tail to take a temperature. Reading the clear signs that Oscar was at a breaking point, rather than forging ahead, Dr. Mello stopped and got Oscar back into a happy, play state. Then Dr. Mello spent two minutes training Oscar that he'd get treats when the technician touched the tail base. Then when it was time to stick the thermometer in, Dr. Mello held Oscar's collar and gentle leader head collar to control his head and front end and simultaneously petted him excitedly so he would focus on the petting rather than the fact that the technician was inserting the thermometer. This minimal comfortable restraint worked.

With Dr. Extreme, Oscar was already at his limit before the toenail trim and then the technician lifted him and flopped him on his side so that he hit his head (www.lowstresshandling.com/dvd/samples/dogside.php for correct and incorrect placement). Then the technician tried to place a muzzle, something unknown to Oscar, so he bit the technician while he struggled to escape.

On the other hand, Dr. Mello started with Oscar in a calm, happy state and let Oscar stand during the toenail trim since this was a more comfortable position than lying laterally. The technician also quickly trimmed the nails in this potentially awkward position. After his visit with Dr. Mello, Oscar left the hospital happy.

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