

## **Advice for all clients regarding behavioural changes in their pets**

We are living in very unusual times. Social distancing and staying at home due to COVID-19 restrictions is having an impact on everyone. It is inevitable as we change our routines that the animals who live with us are affected too. Changes in routine, reduced opportunities to go outside and more noise and activity in the home can all have an impact on the way our pets feel and behave. In some cases, increased stress can lead to changes in behaviour that are problematic or difficult to live with. Your veterinary practice is the first point of contact if you start to see changes in your pet's behaviour. Below are some tips on what to look out for and what you can do to help your pet cope.

### **What changes might affect my pet?**

All animals are individuals, and they will respond to changes in different ways. COVID-19 associated changes that might affect your pet include:

- Everyone in the family being at home all the time
- Lots of noise and activity at times when its normally quiet (e.g. with children being at home during the day)
- Family members being ill, worried or stressed by the current situation
- Changes in routines, and things not happening when pets expect them to
- Family members spending more time with pets, and interacting with them in different ways (such as children wanting lots of cuddles)
- For dogs: reduced exercise, ability to run freely off the lead or play with other dogs

### **What should I do if I'm worried about changes in my pet's behaviour?**

The first place to seek advice is your veterinary practice. Contact them by telephone. Please **do not go to the practice premises** without speaking to the practice first, as they will be following government guidance on social distancing. It is important to speak to your vet first because changes in behaviour can often be a sign of an underlying health problem. Your vet may give you advice directly on the phone, ask to see your pet remotely or arrange to see your pet at the veterinary practice if they consider it necessary and urgent within the current guidelines. They may refer you to another vet specialising in behavioural medicine or to a suitably qualified behaviourist if they are not able to provide the necessary specific advice within the practice.

### **What behaviours should I look out for?**

Different pets will respond in different ways to stress. It is a good idea to speak to your vet if your pet's behaviour has changed from normal, and particularly if you notice any of the following signs:

- Growling, snarling, hissing, spitting, scratching, biting or other signs of confrontation towards family members or other animals.
- Trying to stop family members from leaving the house or room, for example by standing in front of the door, miaowing or barking.
- Dogs starting to lunge and bark at other dogs or people when out for a walk since being exercised on the lead more than usual
- Avoiding contact with family members or other pets. This might include hiding or running away, or just not wanting to play or interact as usual. Turning away or backing off when you approach is another sign to watch out for.
- Being particularly 'needy', such as following you everywhere around the house or always trying to get into your personal space, dogs jumping up or pawing at you or licking you, barking when you're busy doing something else,
- Being less active or playful than usual, such as not wanting to take part in games, or becoming reluctant to spend time with family members or being reluctant to get up

when lying down. You may also notice increased staring at people or other animals, standing still for long periods (apparently listening or watching nothing) or sniffing of the environment

- Unusual and/or repetitive behaviours that do not seem to make any sense. For example, spinning in a circle, chasing lights or shadows or chasing tails.
- Changes in appetite (either very hungry or not wanting to eat) or starting to eat unusual things, such as fabric or plastic.
- Not sleeping at night or being sleepy in the daytime. This might include waking up during the night and pacing or making noises (such as barking, whining or miaowing)
- Changes in toileting habits (e.g. wanting to go outside more to wee, or soiling in the house)

As well as changes in specific behaviour patterns it is also useful to look out for other subtle changes in your pet's body language and behaviour including:

- Changes in behaviour when interacting with family members, such as licking lips, yawning more than usual, drooling, lifting a paw, crouching or cringing, or becoming tense and stiff.
- Increases in behaviours such as stretching, scratching or licking/chewing themselves excessively.
- Dogs 'shaking off' as if they were wet

### **What can I do to help my pet cope?**

There are lots of things you can do to help your pet cope in these difficult times. There are some ideas below, and some ideas of where to look for more information.

- Think about your daily routines. Some pets worry more about change than others – but for those that don't cope, try to keep feeding, walking and play times to the same time each day and avoid sudden changes. Others may thrive on having different things to do during the day. Watch your pet's response to change to find out what works best for them.
- Consistency is always important for our pets. This is particularly important when interacting with your pet – try to make sure all family members react in the same way to avoid confusion. It is confusing for pets if things suddenly change, for example if they are usually allowed upstairs during the day, but because a family member is working from home they are not allowed at the moment. Where possible make changes gradually and make the new alternative rewarding for pet
- Watch your pet's body language carefully – they are very good at telling us when they have had enough, but we do not always notice. Ask all family members to respect when pets take themselves away for some quiet time.
- Plan your day to include some quiet time for pets, when everyone in the household settles down. This is particularly important if your pet is used to having the house to themselves during the day.
- Ensure that your pet can always access a safe and comfortable resting place. Check that everyone in the family knows to not approach your pet when they are in their safe place or den.
- If your pet is worried by any normal household events, such as vacuuming, make sure they can still take themselves away from these, even with a busy household
- Consider the noise and activity levels in the house. With children at home during the day, they may be doing online exercise classes, singing or dancing inside (or adults could be doing this too!). This could either be worrying or exciting for your pet. For most pets, being in another part of the house when very noisy activities are happening is the best option.
- It is essential to ensure emotional and physical safety for everyone so remember to ensure that your pet is not put in difficult situations where it may feel overwhelmed

- Whilst your pets may enjoy you being around all the time now, it is important that they do not start to rely on your company. Make sure they are prepared for when you have to go back to work by building in periods of physical separation from them during the day. This could include going through your normal 'leaving routine' and settling them down before going to a home office for a while, or just having intermittent periods when they are in a different part of the house from family members.
- The majority of dogs do not enjoy being kissed, cuddled or hugged. With more people about in the household, make sure that your pet does not get overwhelmed with too much close contact. Watch their body language when interacting, and allow them to move away if they do not want to join in.
- Continue to provide the same level of exercise where that is possible. Try not to increase the level of exercise without veterinary advice.
- For dogs, the restrictions of only going out once a day, and the need for this to often be only on the lead, will inevitably reduce the amount of exercise they are getting. If there is more than one adult in the household, each taking dogs out separately will increase exercise but be aware that this may lead to your dog having excessive levels of exercise, which may be detrimental. This is particularly relevant if your dog has problems with chronic pain or is old and has issues with arthritis. You can ensure that walks are as interesting as possible by varying routes and introducing games or training sessions into the walk. Where outdoor exercise is limited, it is also important to engage pets in other activities inside. This might include:
  - Puzzle feeder devices or food filled toys - If your pet has not used these before it is best to introduce the easiest ones first so they do not get frustrated.
  - Play sessions at times throughout the day, with suitable and safe toys. Match the amount of play to the age, health and normal activity levels of your pet and remember short frequent play sessions may be more beneficial than long and intense ones.

Your pet is an individual and you know them very well. If you notice something unusual in their behaviour speak to your veterinary practice.

### **Further information**

Advice about dealing with restricted opportunities for walking dogs is available in the book No Walks No Worries by Sian Ryan and Helen Zulch and published by Hubble and Hattie (ISBN-13:978-1845846053).

Further information about caring for your pets during the COVID-19 situation can be found on the websites of:

RSPCA <https://www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/latest/blogs/details/-/articleName/how-to-care-for-your-pets-if-you-re-ill-or-have-to-self-isolate-due-to-coronavirus>

Dogs Trust <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/news-events/news/2020/advice-for-dog-owners-who-need-to-self-isolate-and-stay-at-home>

Cats Protection <https://www.cats.org.uk/help-and-advice/coronavirus>

International Cat Care <https://icatcare.org/advice>

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