

Is it Always Bad for Your Pet to Have Anxiety?

Our topics for this week are:

- **Effects of anxiety on learning**
- **Motivations for prescribing anti-anxiety drugs for animals**
- **When chemical restraint is warranted**

Anxiety is defined as a natural feeling of fear, worry, or unease. It is a normal reaction to new situations. So is excitement, but excitement is not anxiety. Anxiety can be good or bad, so it is important to differentiate when it is helpful in handling animals and when it is detrimental.

The ideal goal in handling animals is to teach them to relax when handled. There is a well-established psychological principle, called the “Yerkes-Dodson Law”, that states performance (learning) increases with low to moderate psychological arousal up to a certain point. Once that point is exceeded performance (learning) decreases. In other words, low to moderate anxiety enhances learning, while high or chronic anxiety is detrimental to learning.

You may hear some people say all anxiety in pets is bad. This is too often stated by some animal behaviorists and for-profit organizations whose opinions are affected by conflicts of interest. That is, there are a financial benefits to them by promoting the use of drugs for all anxiety in pets, such as selling the drugs to clients and/or facilitation of office visits that save time and result in more appointments per day. Other reasons for the excessive reliance on anti-anxiety drugs in pets are to compensate for poor handling skills or being misled by bad information.

Most of the drugs being used for anxiety in pets are used “off-label”, meaning they were not manufactured for use in pets or as a drug intended to control anxiety. All anti-anxiety drugs are sedatives, but not all sedatives are anti-anxiety. Both depress brain activity to some degree.

Using anti-anxiety drugs in pets that have mild to moderate anxiety can cheat them out of the chance of being able to learn to relax when handled, if handled appropriately. On the other hand, if a pet has intense or chronic anxiety that causes “fight or flight” reactions to attempted kind handling, the risk of injury to the animal or its handler warrants at least the consideration of the use of chemical restraint.

The bottom line is do not resort to chemical restraint (anti-anxiety drugs/sedatives) for normal nervousness and excitement in animals. That level of anxiety augments learning. Make sure that the lessons the animal will learn from your handling and restraint will not be forceful or

painful. If the animal has, or will probably will, escalate to fight or flight, it may be wise to use chemical restraint. Chemical restraint should be used for safety, not for convenience, profit, or suppression of all stress and anxiety.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Anti-anxiety drugs for mild to moderate anxiety impair learning how to behave during appropriate handling.**
- 2. Severe anxiety that will probably lead to fight or flight reactions is best managed by chemical restraint.**
- 3. Off-label use of drugs carries higher risks. Prescription anti-anxiety drugs labeled evaluated and approved by the FDA for the use in specific animal species are needed.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 300 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.

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