Veterinary visits are stressful and they will always be stressful, but there are many ways to reduce stress and to make your hospital a patient-friendly atmosphere. As much as pet owners believe that their pet “knows we are trying to help,” we know that is not the case with most. The fear-aggressive Chihuahua does not know that the vaccine is for his own good and the fractious cat does not understand her kidneys are failing and the fluids will help. It’s absolutely amazing that our animals let us do these crazy things to them. We owe it to them to see the hospital from their point of view and to make each visit as pet-friendly as possible.

### Home/Car
All veterinary visits begin at home. Anyone who has ever seen a cat’s reaction to a carrier knows this to be true. If you have a dog/cat that is only put into the car to go to the groomer or vet then the stress begins at home. Advise cat owners to leave carriers out where cats can see them all the time and to maybe even feed them inside the carrier or make it a bed to use by taking off the top. It is also a good idea to use Feliway® wipes on the carrier before departure to the vet. Make sure your cat clients don’t run errands with the cat in the car. Stopping to get gas or going for milk can be very stressful to cats and some dogs. Ask how the animal does in the car. Does the cat start vocalizing the minute it is in the carrier, stressing the entire way to your clinic? Does the dog pace, vocalize, pant, or even vomit? For future visits, these patients may need pheromone or drug intervention.

### Reception
A well-managed reception area can really go a long way to reduce patient stress. Try having a separate area for cats away from the dogs or elevate cat carriers to shelves. (If your reception area allows, use visual barriers or have side areas for nervous patients.) Have receptionists who are trained in reading body language and evaluating stress levels. Have them intervene to help make patients more comfortable. Receptionists should offer yummy treats to the animals that are waiting and move patients that need more space into empty exam rooms or to other waiting areas. Try to schedule so that patients don’t have to wait to be put into their own rooms.

### The Scale
The dreaded scale! Dogs should be lured on with food reinforcement if they accept food from you. If they are too nervous to eat, try having the owners help while you stand back out of the way. Weigh cats inside the carrier. When the doctor needs to get kitty out, weigh the carrier and ask the owners if you can write the weight of the carrier on the carrier itself. I have never had an owner say “no” and then it’s pre-weighed for next time. Having a scale that smells like treats instead of fear pheromones will go a long way in preventing patients’ fear of being weighed.

### Exam Room
This is the most critical room. Hopefully this is the only room that most patients will see. Once in the exam room, the habit of removing leashes from dogs is a good one. If the dog has no history of biting people, being loose in the exam room can remove a lot of frustration. We also remove all choke or pinch collars while in the exam room. Owners of overly friendly dogs tend to keep them on a very tight leash; this type of “restraint” can make the jumping behavior much worse and can increase anxiety. Many times owners are embarrassed by their dog’s “bad” behavior. How many times have you witnessed a yank on the leash or a slap on the rump? It is important that the exam room be punishment free. This is also a better way of gauging how comfortable the dog is with you. Some dogs will be pulling at the end of the leash, but will not approach you once the leash is removed. On the other hand, some more nervous dogs (especially farm dogs not accustomed to leashes) will be more comfortable with the leash off and will approach. Having no leash on the dog will keep a flustered owner from dragging the dog toward you. This allows you more time to lure with treats and make friends. Large dogs are not used to being picked up and do much better on the floor. Yes, it’s true that putting a dog up on the table sometimes scares him into holding still. These dogs are never picked up in their daily lives so being elevated is scary. Many larger dogs will stop taking treats when lifted up and placed on a table. Their stress levels are too high to use food as a reinforcer. It also makes it much more difficult to restrain the animal so wiggling free is reinforced. Keep bigger dogs on the floor where they are more comfortable and get down at their level. If you have a smaller dog or one who must be placed on the exam table, non-slip mats are a dog’s best friend. How many times have you watched a client toss a dog up onto a slippery exam room table? The dog’s eyes widen and he looks like a cartoon character on ice. How about the new puppy or kitten that are so tiny they need that horrid baby scale. Slipping causes panic that can easily be prevented. Once panicking starts, it’s hard to turn off the fear in the brain and it will continue to work against you. No-slip mats on
the exam tables, X-ray tables, scales, and slippery floors can really decrease anxiety and discomfort for arthritic patients.

Food is the easiest, most basic primary reinforcement and a fast way to counter condition the exam room. Exam room=treats. Therefore, I love the exam room. A good way to implement food is to ask clients not to feed their pets before bringing them in for an appointment and to bring some of its favorite treats. Every employee who walks into the exam room should give the dog a treat. Keep plenty of different types of treats around. In our exam rooms, we keep cut up soft and hard treats in a jar on the counter so they are easily accessible. We also have peanut butter, liver paste, hot dogs, cheese, and cream cheese available in case we need high value treats. Treats are useful information to both the animal and the veterinary staff. Correct timing of delivery of the reinforcement to the patient lets him know you like that behavior and will increase the likelihood he does it again. If the animal continues taking treats, then it is an indicator his stress threshold is low enough to be trained. If you have a dog that skipped breakfast to come see you and does not want your peanut butter or hot dog, he is most likely too scared. Stop what you are doing and find a non-stressful starting point.

The veterinary visit is very stressful for cats and nervous or fearful dogs. A good start to reducing stress is to leave the cat in the carrier for as long as possible and don’t approach the fearful dog, letting him do the approaching. Touch is not inherently reinforcing. Many animals need to have a history of trust and reinforcement in order to enjoy petting. As technicians, our doctors want us to get a good history and weight on the animals. If you have a cat cowering in the back of his/her carrier, don’t shake him out onto the table and don’t grab him by the scruff and pull him out. Instead, unscrew the carrier and take it apart. If the cat is stressed enough to react, lay a towel over the bottom portion of the carrier to make him feel like he is still hidden. Once removed from the carrier, leave him under the towel or let the nervous cat hide its head in the crook of your arm. I see this all the time: staff members petting dogs and cats that really don’t want to be touched. If the animal does not approach you willingly, don’t force the issue. When it comes time to do the physical exam, make it fast and give the animal a break from physical contact. When working with cats and birds, do as much of the physical exam with your eyes that you can before the groping begins. Try to limit the amount of helpers, as this will decrease the amount of touching and stress from new people. The towel around the cat does not act as a sensory deprivation tank. We still need to reduce the other senses. This is most important for cats; however, nervous dogs appreciate it too. Don’t talk loudly about how your weekend went while drawing presurgical bloodwork on a cat. With nervous cats, decrease the environmental stimulus by lowering lights, turning off music, and using a small room instead of a busy treatment room. Keep in mind that simply removing the cat from the exam room and walking him through the hospital to the treatment room is going to elevate his stress level. We do all blood draws in the exam room; if the owner does not want to be present, they can step out to the lobby and get a cup of coffee.

**Treatment Room/Radiology/Surgery**

Know your path and make sure it’s free from extra stressors. If you do need to relocate a cat, wrap him in a towel and block his “view” of the hospital. If you are headed to radiology, surgery, or treatment, first check out the room and make sure there is not something going on in there already that will elevate your patient’s stress. Get together the things you will need for your procedure so once the cat is moved you are ready to go. If you have a cat nervous enough to be wrapped in a towel, take a minute and close your eyes. What do you hear? Are there dogs barking in the kennel? Is someone vacuuming? The more we can control the surroundings, the better the cats will do. When moving dogs, first make sure the coast is clear of other animals or loud noises. Don’t take the dog back to the treatment room and then set up for your catheter or X ray. Let the animal stay in the exam room as long as possible with his/her owners, then take them back for the shortest visit possible. Remember, separation is stressful for both patient and owner.

**Considerations for the Whole Hospital**

Smells can be our best friend or our worst enemy. Unfortunately, most vet clinics “smell the same.” Ever had a new client say “I don’t know how he knows he is at the vet”? The second they walk in the front door they are hit with disinfectant, fear pheromones, etc. You can have the cleanest facility and still have that eau de vet clinic smell. We can increase the good pheromones in two ways. First, decrease the amount of stress in your patients. Happy patients equal happy pheromones. Second, use the artificial pheromones. Plug in Feliway® diffusers or use Feliway® spray on towels used for restraint in your cat room. Try D.A.P® plug-in diffusers in the dog exam rooms. Also, the more food reinforcement is used, the more your exam rooms will smell like treat jars instead of alcohol.
Pay attention to what your patients are telling you. Often, when I give lectures on body language, I am amazed at what signals people miss. Yes, we are savvy to aggression when it comes at our face, but what about the three minutes prior to that? There is rarely a bite without warning. Learn how to read stress signals. When these stress (also called calming or conflict) behaviors occur, that is the point in which to stop. The more common early signs of stress include, but are not limited to: yawning, averted gaze, whale eye, scratching, wet dog shake, paw lift, low and stiff wagging tail, or licking lips. Once conflict behaviors occur, the animal is in a state of conflict and is trying to decide what to do next. If we slow the situation down, decreasing conflict behaviors and increasing reinforcement, it is likely the animal will never elevate to showing aggressive behaviors. You cannot reinforce fear with food.

You may not win every battle, but it is the outcome of the war that counts. This is especially true for nervous or fearful animals, but don’t forget about the happy ones too. Just because we can hold down the happy lab and take his temperature and use a fecal loop on him doesn’t mean we should. Unless you work in an emergency clinic, you will have to handle this animal again and even if you do work in an emergency clinic, you might have to handle this animal again. If things are elevating, stop! Does this toenail trim have to be done now? Send home training tips or maybe even drugs to reduce the anxiety next time. In our clinic, if it takes more than one person to restrain or a muzzle is needed, we consider it too much and we determine what needs to happen next time. Keep in mind that you need to be able to touch this animal next time, so just because you can muzzle, should you? How many of us are bitten every year trying to get that muzzle on the second time?

When things get rough, keep your cool. Admit it…you have witnessed a staff member lose their temper with a patient. It normally leads to over-restraint, but sometimes a slap on the rump or worse. If the animal is nervous enough or has had a previous bad experience, they may have learned that a good offense is the best defense. Most aggression towards veterinary staff is fear based and has a learned component. So, if two people lie on the dog for a toenail trim, we are increasing his anxiety. It could get even worse. If he wiggles free or bites someone, it ends the toenail trim and the dog learns how to stop it next time. We have more and more “aggressive” dogs that come from other clinics where the dogs have been muzzled and held down and are terrified of the veterinary exam room. After a few visits at our clinic (including happy visits), most of these dogs are not muzzled or restrained now and do just fine. We even have some who are excited to come see us. Changing the social norms of any clinic is a slow process, but as the other technicians and doctors see the changes in your patients and clients, they will be won over.

**Recommended Reading**

