

Behavior Myths

1. My cat urinates on the bed because he is mad at me.

Actually, animals don't feel spite or anger. Instead, the cat may be stressed, unable to get to the litter box because of another pet, have separation anxiety, or may have just learned that the owner's bed is clean and soft and the litter box isn't.

2. My dog jumps on me. He must want to be the pack leader.

Actually, most dogs misbehave due to a lack of training, intermittent reinforcement by the owner and limited other ways to dissipate excess energy not because they want to lead the pack. Most dogs jump for attention and continue to jump because owners reinforce the dogs by petting them, pushing on them or yelling at them.

3. Most behavior problems can be solved with a medication.

Medications can be an essential part of a treatment plan for many pets with behavior problems, however they rarely solve pet behavior problems without behavior modification and environmental changes.

3. Puppies should not go anywhere except the owner's yard and the veterinary hospital until they are 16 weeks of age.

Puppies should begin socialization to the people and animals in their environment as soon as they are adopted. The sensitive period for socialization in dogs is 3-12 weeks. During this time, a small amount of effort results in a large impact on the puppy's adult behavior. More importantly, lack of exposure often leads to fear of stimuli to which the puppy has never been exposed. If owners wait until 16 weeks of age to begin socializing puppies to stimuli in the environment, there is a higher likelihood that those pups will exhibit fearful behavior resulting in serious behavior problems.

4. Cats can't be trained.

While it is true that cats are harder to train than most dogs, they are trainable. Owners see the results of training each day when their cat comes running at the sound of the food bag or can opener. Most of the challenges encountered when training cats result from the cat's lack of motivation and the owner's unrealistic expectations. To be successful, the cat should be trained when he is hungry and when he has not seen the owner for a while. In addition, training sessions should be limited to 5 minutes. The owner will fare best by starting with something that the cat already does such as using his natural desire to swat things to teach him to "high-five."

Thunderstorm Phobia

With each thunderstorm season, veterinarians are presented with patients who are destructive, pant, pace, urinate, defecate, vocalize, hypersalivate and even act aggressively during a storm. This can be a challenging problem to treat during thunderstorm season because of the repeated exposure to storms. Most dogs need a daily administered anti-anxiety drug such as fluoxetine (Reconcile) or clomipramine (Clomicalm) in addition to a drug which is given PRN such as diazepam or alprazolam. As with most pet behavior problems, it doesn't stop with the medication. Pets need to be given tools to cope with the panic they are feeling during thunderstorms. For example, they need a safe place to go where sounds are minimized and something positive to occupy their time during the storm. Also, while owners shouldn't ignore their dog completely, coddling them is not helpful in reducing the anxiety. Instead, owners should engage the pet in play or positive reinforcement training that is easy for the pet and that he enjoys. In the off season, pets can be desensitized to the sounds and sights of thunderstorms and can be taught to relax on cue so that they have a way to cope with storms in next year's season.

Introducing a New Cat

Before introducing cats, it is helpful to understand their natural behavior. Feral cats typically live in matrilineal, related colonies. Male cats may travel among a number of colonies. When an adult female cat enters the colony, they are typically driven away by the other cats. In other words, it is expected that a cat would show aggression when it first encounters another cat in its territory. It is important to look at animals who inhabit the same household as roommates and not family. Have you gotten along well with every roommate you have ever had? Following the guidelines below can help to make the addition of another cat into the household more enjoyable for everyone.

1. Increase the number of litter boxes to $n+1$ (n =number of cats) and place them in easily accessible areas which cannot be blocked by other cats.
2. Add a Feliway® diffuser.
3. Introduce cats slowly on either side of a barrier using food and play.
4. Increase the number of hiding and resting spaces in each room where the cats will typically be found.
5. Increase the number of feeding/watering stations to equal the number of cats and distribute them around the house.
6. Keep the cats separated until they are showing non-aggressive interest in each other. Then, let them out to interact with supervision.
7. Share scents by exposing each cat to the other's scent.

8. Let the cats explore the other's area individually so that they can become accustomed to that cat's scent.