Setting up our pets for success during and post-Covid 19

Covid-19 has certainly upset the world as we know it. For our pets, it might seem that dogs are literally in heaven! Owners are home all the time, they're getting 500 walks a day, sneaky extra treats, and barrels of attention - life is sweet!

For cats with owners hanging around home more, a few may be loving it but many aren't.

How do we know if our pets are pleased or stressed about the changes? This article will hopefully help us identify behaviour cues from our pets, with a few tips on how we can improve their time during restrictions, which will ultimately help them when life goes back to "normal".

Let's go back to the beginning.

Dogs have been bred for sociability and close association with humans.

Cats... not so much – they are much more independent but have been bred to be in (close-ish) association with humans.

The critical period for our pets is 3-12 weeks of age for dogs (some breeds up to 16 weeks), and for cats is 3-8 weeks of age. The puppy or kitten's experiences during this period of learning and development is significantly important for influencing and shaping their behaviour for the rest of their adult life. Exposing them to positive experiences, gentle human handling and play, introduction to other pets, people, and noises will build independence and resilience that will set them up for a stress-free life.

As owners of dogs and cats, it is our responsibility to ensure we meet their environmental needs, which is basically the minimum standard of pet care.

As dog owners, we should be providing the following:

- An area of rest – we want this to be in an area of the house where the dog can be part of the action but out of the way so they can properly rest
- Providing an adequate diet for eating and water for drinking
- An area for sleeping - dogs require 16 hours of undisturbed sleep per day!! This may need to be a separate area than the resting spot
- Toys to chew - this is a self-soothing mechanism often done to wind down
- Time for social play
- Time for individual play
- Time for exercise

Cats are slightly different to dogs, requiring:

- Areas for resting – including areas where they can jump up high ("vertical opportunities")
- Areas for eating – it is REALLY important this area is private and alone
- Water for drinking – cats can be very particular with the taste of water (influenced by the type of bowl, running vs still, Evian vs tap), location is also important
- An area for sleeping - cats want to feel safe while they sleep
- Areas allowing for grooming – generally self-groom before meals and sleeping
- Areas for toileting – number of litter trays, location and type of litter/tray will be of individual preference for each cat. Ensuring 1 litter tray per cat PLUS 1 extra is vital.
- Areas and time for play and exercise

Structure and routine are really important to our pets.

With most pet owners working from home during covid-19 restrictions, changes to daily routine include less time alone, less quality of daytime sleep, lack of routine, increased frequency of walks, increased play, increased social and mental stimulation (eg. Puzzle toys), increased foot traffic passing houses (with more people out exercising), and increased disinfection smells (note the smell of alcohol is really scary to cats).

Additionally, for many households a new pet may have been introduced. Depending on the individual pet, some will find these changes so fantastically positive, however for others these changes are not ideal.

Identifying that our pets are finding it hard can be challenging. It is really important we get to know, read and understand our pets body language.

When a dog or cat is feeling threatened they will typically display behaviours that can be categorised into the Four F's:

- Fiddle – normal behaviours that are shown out of context
- Freeze - the pet has panicked and doesn't know what to do and can no longer make rational decisions
- Flight - take self away from the situation
- Fight - growling, snapping, biting; aggression. A dog in pure panic.

Freeze and fiddle cues can very subtle to pick up.

Fiddle behaviours indicate that our pet is uncomfortable, feeling stressed, anxious and in fear. Fiddle behaviours include licking lips ('lip-smacking'), yawning, averting eyes, avoiding eye contact, scratching self, highly vigilant, loss of focus, pacing, barking, being particularly clingy, and aggression.

Cats can be even more difficult to read, as mostly they will decrease their interaction time with family. There are less subtle behaviours that can highlight cats are feeling stressed, most commonly with toileting problems (increased frequency of urination, straining to urinate, blood in urine, vocalising when using litter tray, toileting outside the litter tray), aggression when interacting with, grooming problems, scratching, pacing, vocalising, eating random objects ('pica'), increased sleeping, loss of appetite, and unsettled resting patterns.

It is really important that when our pets are in a stressful situation and begin to display behaviours, such as growling, that we do not punish them for this.

During covid-19 restrictions there has been a reported increased in aggression of dogs towards other pets in the same household, unfamiliar dogs and family members, toileting problems, gastro-intestinal problems, and destructive behaviours. In cats, the most common complaints have been reduced interaction with family members, repetitive behaviours, and most commonly toileting problems.

If our pet is struggling now, they are going to be struggling even more when life goes back to "normal".

We need to set our pets up to win. Pet owners in Sydney are starting to head back into the office, whether that's 1-2 days a week or fulltime.

Changes that our pets will be facing now or in the future include:

- Changes in routine AGAIN
- Less social interaction
- Less frequent walks, and less duration of walks
- Longer time spent alone
- Less neighbourhood activity
- More hurried and stressed family members busily rushing about for school, work, etc

We need to ensure that our pets basic needs are being met and their time schedules are being filled.

Monitor (even journal!) interactions and responses of your pet in their current situation, and with their activities throughout the day. Are they showing signs of stress, distress or anxiety?

For example, a dog that may pace all day while the owner is at work may rush to the water bowl as soon as their owner gets home, because they have been too stressed to drink all day. Signs can be very subtle!!

Tips for success

- Dogs and cats love structure and routine. Structure the week and make gradual changes as required.
- Gradually increase alone time (building up from a short period of time and slowly increasing)
- Ensure you are meeting their needs – social, mental and physical
- Video your pet when they are alone
- Ensure your pet has access to a safe place
- Talk to neighbours
- Introduce anti-anxiety pheromones, including Adaptil for dogs, Feliway for cats, and Zylkene (milk-based capsule) which can be used for short or long-term use

We all know now what it is like to be stuck inside our homes 24/7 for weeks on end - it's boring and it sucks. Mental health has unfortunately taken a toll not only on the human species, but also on our pets as well.

Let's set our pets up for success, being resilient and stress-free for any changes that may occur tomorrow, next week or in the years to come.

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