

Reactive Dog Behaviour Modification and Medication



"Animals are sensitive and perceptive creatures, and trust is a two-way street. You must trust that they will not bite you, just as they must trust that you will not hurt them."

Ken Ramirez (1999): "Animal Training: Successful Animal Management Through Positive Reinforcement"



Fear, and the inability to flee a fearful situation, may cause the dog to lash out to protect himself, or it may cause him to "shut down". Both are a normal and natural responses. The problem arises when the dog's fear is caused by events that are not in fact dangerous to him and that he is exposed to in daily life - what we would call "irrational fear", "inappropriate aggression", or an "out-of context reaction".

Not all dogs' conditions are of the kind that need medication, but those that do should be given the opportunity. Medication is not a "last resort", but a way to help the dog cope with his fears and to help us help the dog to progress with the management and behaviour modification protocols in the best possible way.

It is time to discuss medication with your veterinarian when the dog's condition, environment and/or living situation is such that we are not able to protect him from the things that cause him to react inappropriately or out-of-context, i.e. we are not able to prevent his condition from being maintained, or even made worse. At this point, the dog's quality of life is in jeopardy. Medication may help to raise the dog's reaction threshold and thereby facilitate the behaviour modification programme.

When a dog is physically ill, medications are used to help ease pain and discomfort, and even to help cure the illness. Likewise, anti-anxiety medication is used to ease the emotional pain and distress that the dog is experiencing. While we cannot see a dog's anxiety like we can a broken leg or a tumour, the emotional distress is no less real to the dog. Like your veterinarian will use surgery, supported by medication, to fix a broken leg or a tumour, we use behaviour modification, supported by anti-anxiety medication, to relieve the dog's emotional distress. Note that medication is rarely, if ever, effective on its own. We also need to implement training and behaviour modification.

Anti-anxiety medication may improve the dog's quality of life by bringing his stress down to a level where the behaviour modification programme, including both management protocols and training protocols, become more effective in not only preventing fear reactions, but also reducing the dog's reactivity, i.e. making him better. Living with chronic stress can be debilitating and may even cause subsequent medical conditions.

Behaviour medications are NOT intended to sedate the dog. They work by modifying the dog's brain function to reduce fear and promote learning during the training sessions that are a necessary component of the treatment. If your dog appears to become sedated or groggy, that is an unwanted side effect that you should bring to your veterinarian's attention. Also let your veterinarian know if the medication appears to not be effective, so that a different medication may be found or the dosage adjusted.

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Unfortunately, there are some wide-spread misconceptions associated with giving our dogs behavioural medications, such as:

"The dog should be able to cope."

If your friend was suffering from an irrational fear, even being unable to work, acting strangely in social situations, perhaps not eating properly or not sleeping well, would you just tell him or her to 'get on with it'? Or, would you suggest that he or she sees a doctor to get therapy and medication?

"Medication should be a last resort."

If there is an underlying anxiety disorder, it requires treatment, which may include medication. The longer the condition persists, the worse it may get. The longer a behaviour is rehearsed, the more difficult it may be to resolve.

"I would rather use a natural product."

Anything your dog ingests will affect his physiology, including food and holistic remedies. Sadly, few alternative therapies are regulated, and many may not even have been proven to be effective. Discuss alternative substances, including so-called 'natural supplements' with your veterinarian before giving them to your dog. 'Natural' does not necessarily equal 'safe'.

"My spouse/neighbour/friends/family will judge me for failing my dog and drugging him up."

The fact that your dog needs help does not mean in any way that you have "failed" him, just as you would not have "failed" him if he came down with cancer, or broke a leg while playing in the woods with his friends. When deciding what is best for your dog, whatever that may be, feel strong in your decision. Nobody can make this decision for you, because they do not live in your shoes. What is best for you, your family and your dog is what really matters.

"Medication and veterinary visits are expensive."

If your dog has a behaviour condition that requires medical treatment, it is no different than treating him for, say, kidney disease or thyroid disease. We are all on a budget. When you look at the cost of medication, consider also the cost of the behaviour consultations, and you may find that it will make sense to use medication in order to make better progress and help limit your behaviour consultation fees. *Guess what also helps to speed progress and cut costs?*

- *Doing your homework in between lessons!* ☺

Concerns about side effects

In my experience, side effects are few. Discuss your concerns with your veterinarian when you consult about the medication.

A Final Thought

Consider also the emotional and the physiological side effects of the stress that your dog is suffering from right now. In humans, long-term effects of stress include insomnia, reduced immune system function, low energy, aches and pains, learning difficulties, increased blood pressure and many more. There is reason to believe that dogs suffer many of the same side effects of stress, which may reduce not only your dog's quality of life, but also his lifespan. However, as they are non-verbal patients, we may not always know.

Please consult regularly with your veterinarian. ■