

Behavioural Medicine in Veterinary Sciences

Dr Mousumi Hazorika*, Dr Pallabi Devi, Dr Abhijit
Deka, Dr Mridusmrita Buragohain
[DOI:10.5281/Vettoday.15535797](https://doi.org/10.5281/Vettoday.15535797)

Behavioural medicine can be defined as an interdisciplinary field concerned with the development and integration of behavioral, psychosocial, and biomedical science knowledge and techniques relevant to the understanding of health and illness, and the application of this knowledge and these techniques to prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation.

Behavioural medicine in Veterinary science is a rapidly evolving field that addresses the mental and emotional health of animals. It involves the diagnosis, treatment, and management of behavioral disorders in pets and other animals, focusing on psychological well-being. This field has gained significant attention as more pet owners and veterinarians recognize the importance of mental health in animals, similar to how human psychology and mental health are treated.

Behavioural Problems

Behavioural problems can vary widely depending upon the species and within the species it varies between individual animals. However, some common problems are listed below:

1. Separation Anxiety: A condition in which animals, particularly dogs, become anxious and distressed when left alone. This can manifest certain symptoms like excessive barking, destructive behaviour, and house-soiling.

2. Aggression: Animals may exhibit aggressive behavior toward other animals, people, or even inanimate objects. This can be triggered by fear, frustration, territoriality, or resource guarding. Aggressive behaviours can range from growling

and snapping to more dangerous biting or attacking.

3. Phobias: Most of the animals develop intense fears of certain stimuli like loud noises (e.g., thunderstorms, fireworks), unfamiliar objects, or certain environments.

4. Compulsive Behaviours: Pets may engage in repetitive behaviours, such as tail chasing, chewing on non-food items, excessive licking, or self-mutilation, are often stress-induced and can be hard to manage without intervention.

5. Depression: Pets can experience a form of depression, especially following major life changes like the loss of a companion, moving homes, or experiencing neglect.

6. House-soiling: Inappropriate urination or defecation can be linked to behavioral issues, particularly in cats and dogs.

Diagnosis

A complete behavioural assessment is the first step in treating mental health problems in pets. This may include the following---

- 1. History:** Taking thorough history in details to understand the animal's behavior, medical history, and any recent life changes.
- 2. Behavioural study:** Observing the pet's behavior in different situations to identify triggers or patterns.
- 3. Differential diagnosis:** Ruling out underlying health issues, as medical conditions can often appear through behavioral changes. For example, a dog that is suddenly showing signs of aggression may have an undiagnosed injury causing pain, rather than an underlying psychological issue.

Treatment

Treatment for mental health disorders in animals often needs a multi-faceted approach. The methods commonly used are listed below:

1. Behaviour Modification

Positive Reinforcement: Rewarding good behavior can encourage pets to adopt desirable actions. For example, emphasizing calm behavior in a dog with separation anxiety can reduce stress over time.

Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning: Gradually exposing a pet to the condition causing anxiety (such as being left alone) and coupling it with positive experiences can help lessen the emotional response.

2. Environmental Changes

Sometimes, simply altering the pet's environment can help reduce anxiety. Creating a safe space, providing heartening activities (like toys or puzzle feeders), and ensuring a structured routine can alleviate stress.

3. Pharmacological Intervention

In certain cases, medications may be given to help manage aggression, anxiety, or other behavioral issues. Common medications used comprise anti-anxiety medications (like benzodiazepines), antidepressants (SSRIs), and sedatives. These drugs are often combined with behavioral therapy for the most effective results.

It's significant to remember that medications should only be used under the supervision of a veterinarian, as misuse can cause adverse effects.

4. Alternative Therapies

Other alternative therapies like acupuncture, pheromone diffusers, and music therapy have demonstrated potential benefits in some animals. These gentle, non-invasive approaches may help alleviate anxiety and promote relaxation in pets.

The Importance of Early Intervention

Timely intervention plays a vital role in effectively managing behavioral problems. Tackling issues at their onset can stop them from escalating and negatively impacting a pet's quality of life. For instance, if a young dog begins to exhibit fear or aggressive tendencies, consulting a veterinary behaviourist early can help modify these

behaviours before they become deeply rooted and harder to treat.

Preventing Behavioural Issues

Prevention is always better than treatment, and this principle applies to pets as well. Early socialization and the use of positive reinforcement lay the foundation for emotionally balanced, confident animals. Incorporating regular mental stimulation, interactive play, and consistent exercise further supports a pet's mental and emotional well-being.

Conclusion

Behavioural medicine is an essential aspect of modern veterinary care. Just as humans benefit from therapy, medication, and environmental adjustments, animals can also experience significant relief from mental health challenges with appropriate support. As awareness of pet mental health continues to grow, more owners are seeking professional help, and veterinary teams are increasingly equipped to address these complex issues. By identifying behavioral concerns early and implementing a tailored combination of behavioral therapy, environmental enrichment, and medical intervention, we can help pets lead happier, healthier lives.

If you observe unusual changes in your pet's behavior, it's important to consult a veterinary behaviourist. Our pets depend on us to support not only their physical health but also their emotional well-being.