‘Handing them out like Lollies’ The Rise of Anti-Anxiety Medication

Dr Zoe Devine

BSc BMVS MANZCVS (Veterinary Behaviour)

Animal Sense

Fear Free Certified

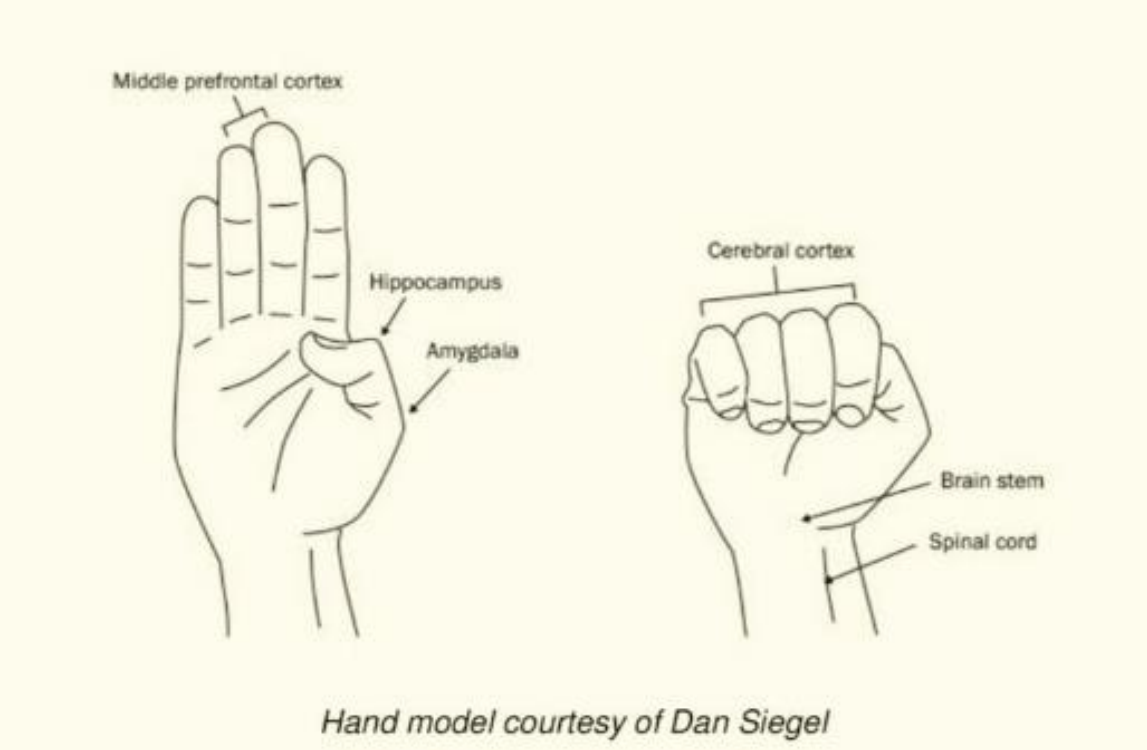
Thanks to our sponsors

Contents

- The anxious brain and common presentations of mental ill health
- Prevalence of anxiety in our pet population
- Contributing factors
- Should we be medicating as much as we are?
- What meds do vs What they don’t do
- When and how to stop medication
- Pre-vet medication options and thoughts

The anxious brain

- Disconnect between the rational thinking brain and the threat detecting centre
- Threat detecting systems get good at identifying perceived threats
- Brain gets hijacked into making snap decisions
- Chronic stress cycle



Hand model courtesy of Dan Siegel

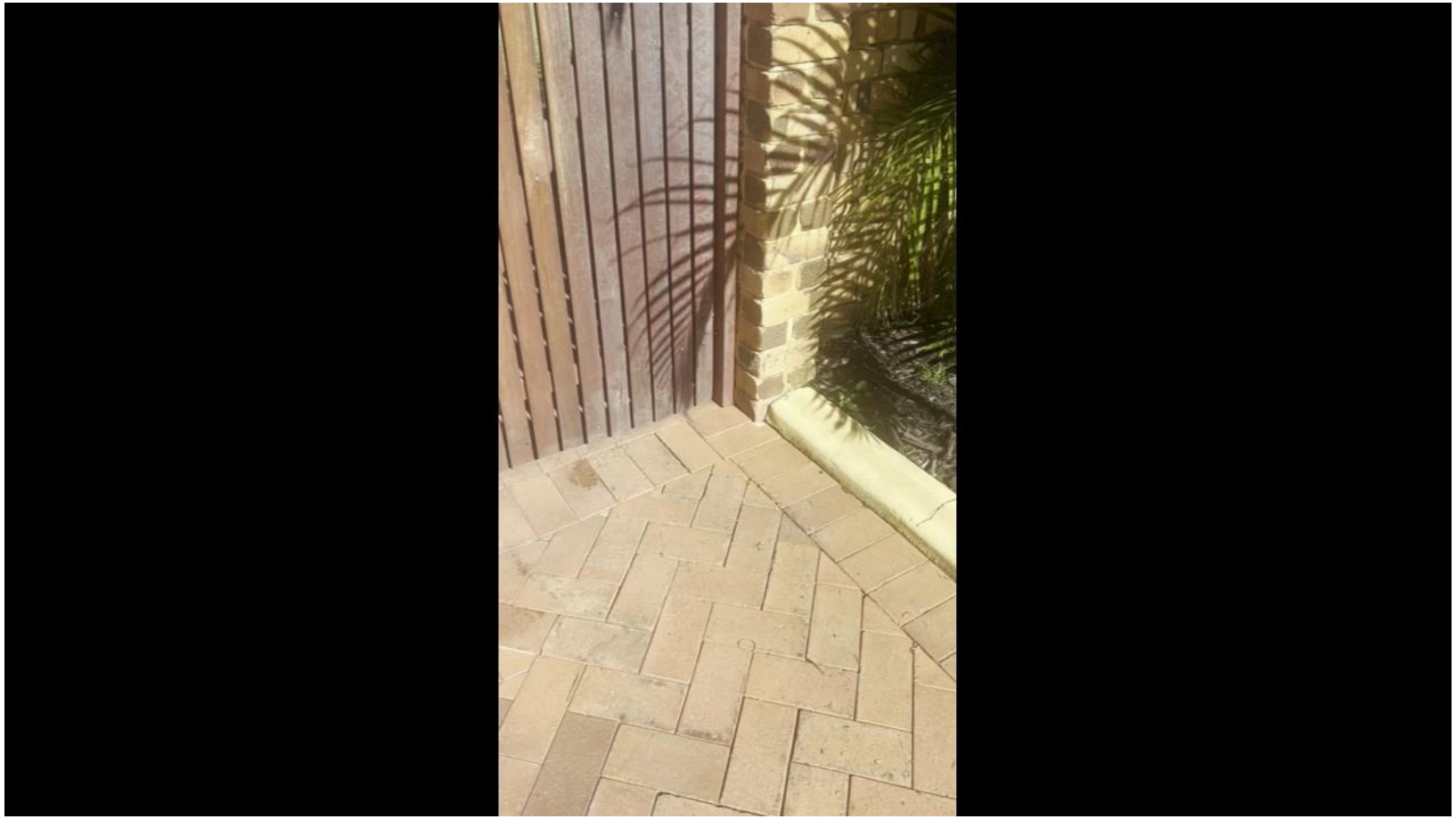
Common presentations of anxiety

- Startle
- 5 F's- freeze, flight, fight, fidget, fawn
- Distance decreasing
  - Separation anxiety
  - Hypersensitive-hyperactive type
- Distance increasing
  - Fear- avoidant or offensive
  - Resource guarding
- Making ourselves feel better
  - Compulsive

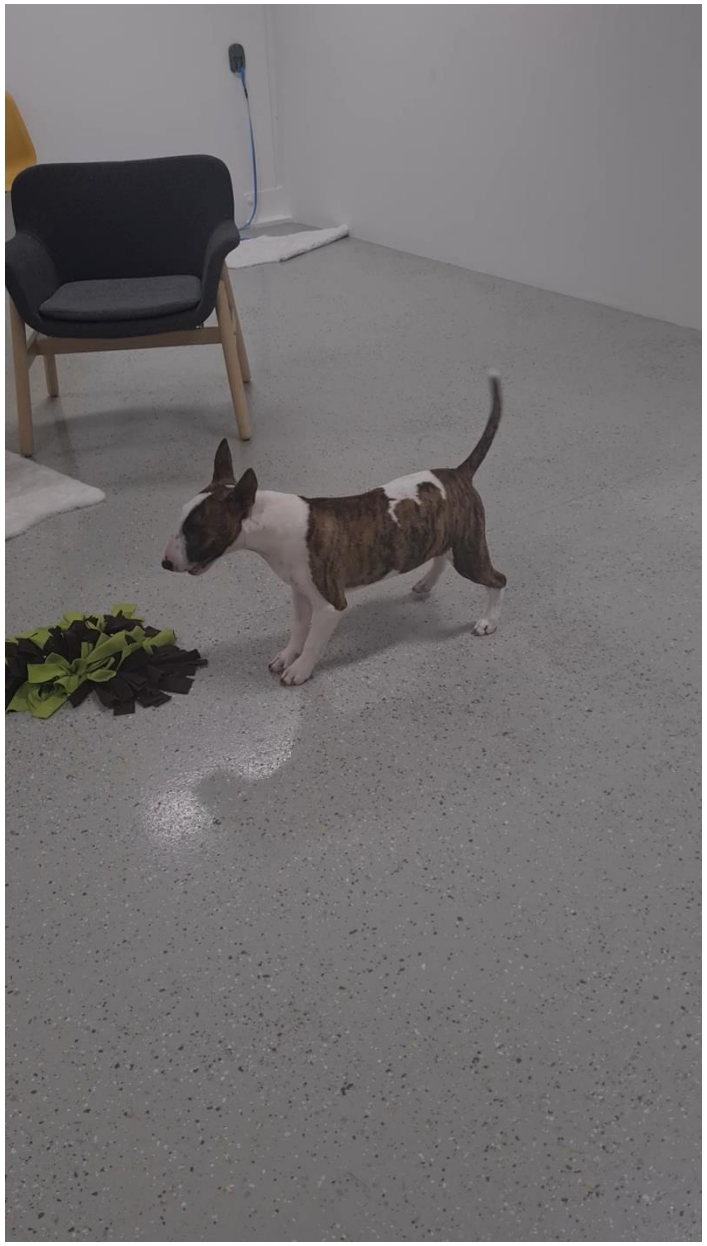
Startle

Freeze

Flight, fidget, some fawn/appeasement

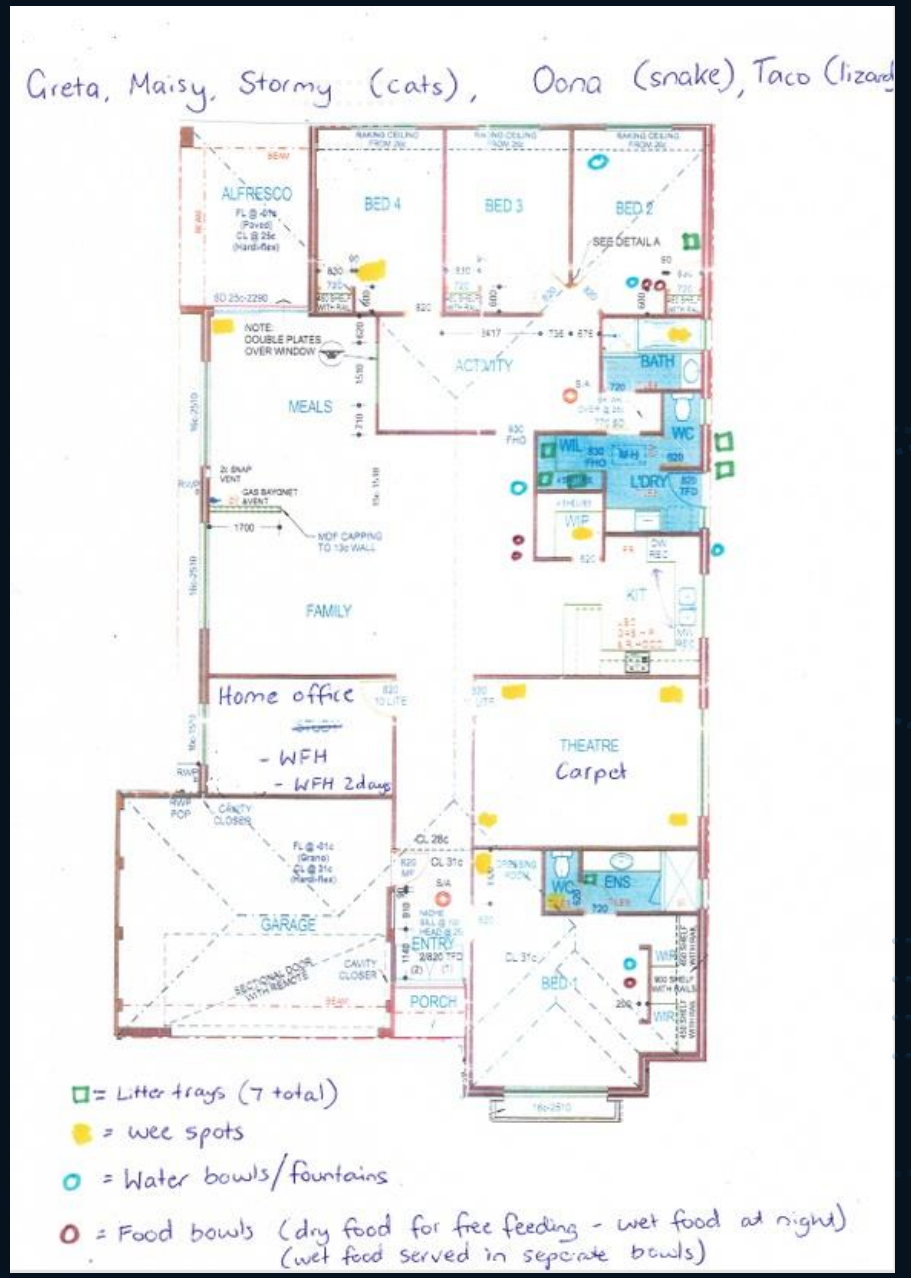


Compulsion

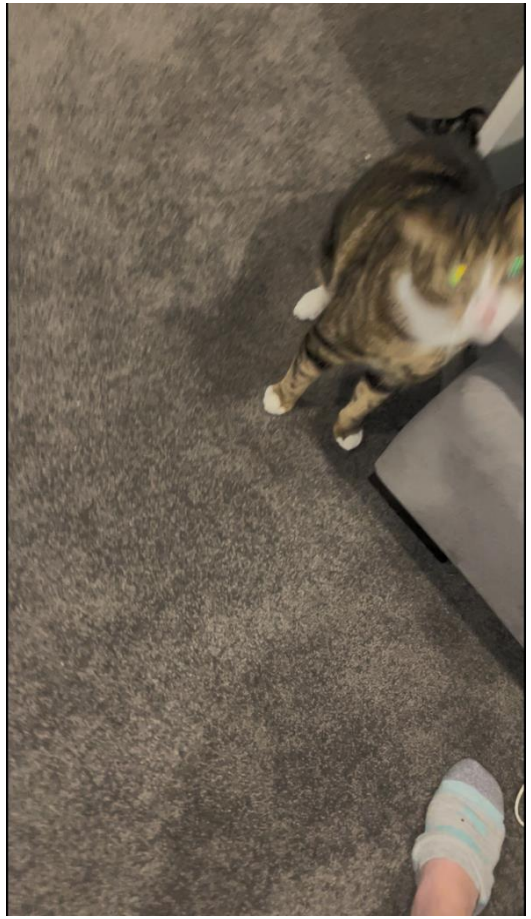


Hypersensitive-hyperactive type

House soiling cat



Feline conflict aggression



Prevalence of mental health disorders

- 1 in 5 Australian people suffer from mental ill health
- Similar numbers in our pet populations
- Recent US study looking at 32 million canine health records between 2010-2020 indicated the frequency of behavior problem labels increased 10-fold from 1.0% in 2010 to 10.2% in 2020
- Separation anxiety, aggression, fear or other anxieties
- Prescribing of fluoxetine, clomipramine and trazodone increased concurrently

AVMA Publications

From: Weng H, Morrison JA, Topdjian K, Ogata N. Real-world data on behavioral practices for dogs in primary care veterinary hospitals in the United States (2010–2020). ***Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association. 2025;263(7):1-7. doi:10.2460/javma.24.06.0412***

DOI: https://doi.org/10.2460/javma.24.06.0412

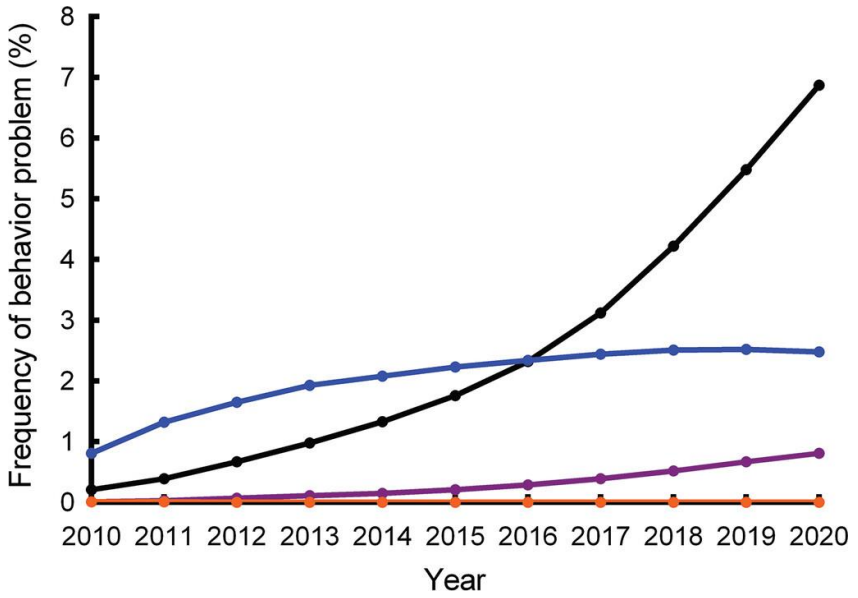


Figure 2 Annual percentages of the target behavior problem labels of aggression (blue), separation anxiety (orange), fear or other anxiety unrelated to separation anxiety (black), and multiple problems (purple) documented in the medical records of dogs seen at primary care veterinary hospitals in the US from 2010 to 2020.

Date downloaded: 18/Mar/2026

© 2025 American Veterinary Medical Association All Rights Reserved.

AVMA Publications

From: Weng H, Morrison JA, Topdjian K, Ogata N. Real-world data on behavioral practices for dogs in primary care veterinary hospitals in the United States (2010–2020). ***Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association. 2025;263(7):1-7. doi:10.2460/javma.24.06.0412***

DOI: https://doi.org/10.2460/javma.24.06.0412

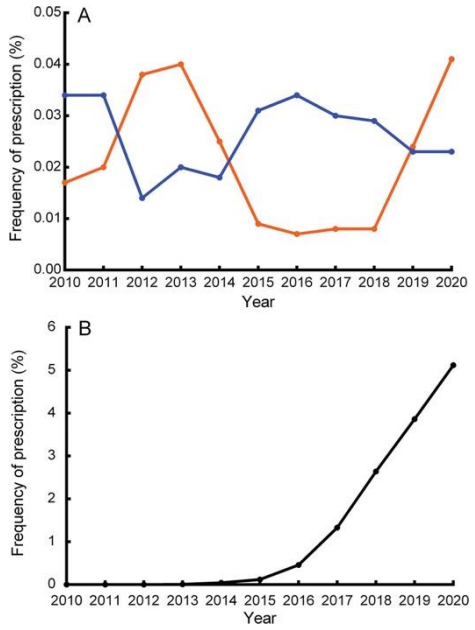


Figure 1 Annual percentages of prescription of (A) clomipramine (blue line) and fluoxetine (orange line) and (B) trazodone (black line) for dogs seen at primary care veterinary hospitals in the US from 2010 to 2020.

Date downloaded: 18/Mar/2026

© 2025 American Veterinary Medical Association All Rights Reserved.

Why?

- Societal, environmental factors
- Animal factors
- Human factors
  - Breeders
  - Caregivers

Environmental factors

- Higher expectations around what our dogs ‘should’ be able to do
- Expect our dogs to be social with all people and all dogs
- Expect they can go out into public areas
    - Café, pub dog, therapy dogs
- Reality
    - Not enough space
    - Stationary
    - Hard ground, not interesting
    - Basic skills haven’t been taught in a calmer location
    - Food
    - Genetically not suitable for therapy dogs

Social media

- Presented as cute, funny, loving
- Often see
  - Stressed body language
  - Inappropriate interactions
  - Unrealistic expectations
  - Aversive training methods
- Multi-dog households
- Dogs and Kids
  - Family Paws Website
  - Tell Your Dog/Cat You're Pregnant by Dr Lewis Kirkham

Individual factors

- Anxiety disorders are inherited from familial genes
  - Breeding anxious dogs, interbreeding
  - Bold vs shy genes in cats
- Amygdala priming in utero due to maternal stress
  - High cortisol levels during pregnancy increase threat centre activation
  - Born with a higher threat detecting apparatus
  - Rescue dogs or cats already pregnant, puppy mills, camp dogs or cats
- Poor mothering after birth can also impact early brain development in both dogs and cats
- What the animal was bred to do
  - Impacts genetic and behavioural tendencies
  - Common triggers within groups of dogs
    - New people + guarding breeds
    - Movement + herding breeds
  - Cats from feral genetics may be harder to contain inside, higher prey drive which can lead to play aggression
  - Less domesticated cats can be more intense- Bengals

Breeders

- Canine socialisation period commences at three weeks, finishes at 12-16 weeks
- Characteristics
  - Willingness to approach new things, explore
  - Toileting habits away from bedding
  - Increased social interactions, attachments are formed
  - Context around different places, types of people, other animals within the world
- Calm, positive experiences
- Breeders should be promoting all characteristics
- Using programs like Puppy Culture to allow good brain development
- Avoid
  - Not seeing the parents, rearing space,
  - Early desexing

How caregivers contribute

- Expectations of the animal
- Limited or flooded socialisation period
- Unpredictable environment
  - Busy households
  - Unrestricted handling by children or interactions with other household pets
  - Poorly structured boundaries or communication methods
- Punishment based training methods
- Getting two puppies together
- Two kittens together are ok, sisters or mother/daughter best
- Interstate puppies

‘My anxiety has made my dog like this’

- Emotional contagion
  - Caregiver’s anxiety can contribute to the pet’s own anxiety
  - Feed off one another, one does not cause the other
  - Caregiver’s can have their own anxieties after traumatic events with the dog- dog attack, dog bites etc.

Should we be medicating as much as we are?

- Yes…but
- Factors to start medication
- What we are expecting of our medications
- What medication to pick
- What we can’t expect from meds

When should we medicate?

- When the patient's brain is showing signs of not being able to learn and change effectively
  - Actions being driven by the threat detecting centre
  - Can't eat= can't learn
- Can't be at a reasonable starting distance from the trigger
  - >100m seeing another dog/human on walks
- Trigger cannot be reasonably managed
  - Separation anxiety with full time workers
  - Household aggression- cats, dogs
  - Inappropriate toileting
- Internal drive for behaviour is too strong
  - Compulsion
  - Hypersensitive-hyperactive type
- Behaviour is dangerous to the animal or others
  - Won't stop a bite event, however, can increase the time it takes for something to occur
  - Euthanasia, rehoming, punishment-based training

What medications are we picking and why?

- Long term medication
- SSRI most common
  - Fluoxetine <20kg
  - Sertraline >20kg
  - Cats- compounded SSRI, watch for urine/faecal retention, start low
- Assist the brain's ability to learn
- Allow neuroplasticity to form new pathways
- Allow new, calmer behaviours to 'stick'
- Increases improvements when combined with training compared with training alone

Medication timeline

- SSRI's don't START working in the brain until 6-8 weeks after commencing them
- Not expecting complete resolution of behaviour on the medication, even situational medication
  - Duration/frequency/intensity + recovery of behaviour is improved
- Self rated improvements useful for tracking progress of entire plan
  - 30-50% improvement after three months
  - >50% after six months
  - Further improvements one to two years after starting treatment
- Expect a two-year medication plan as a minimum

Don’t be afraid of situational medications

- Trazodone, clonidine, gabapentin, benzodiazepines
- Cats= pregabalin
- Most patients need a situation medication + baseline
- Situational medications should be given before the dog gets stressed, or multiple times a day if predicting triggers is hard
- Ok to combine SSRIs and Trazodone together at standard doses
- Can be a long-term situation, provided we have other strategies
    - Management, modification, baseline medication

Medication can’t change the environment

- Caregivers will have to make more changes than just medicating
  - Where/how they walk
  - Separating kids and pet OR separating pets from each other
  - Can’t leave the dog alone
  - Paying for sedation + fear free approach to handling
- Can’t keep exposing the animal to the trigger and expect changes
- Often a very hard step for caregivers
- Main reason why meds ‘fail’
- Environmental needs of cats are specific
  - 5 Pillars of Enrichment from AAFP and ISFM

Medication won’t change caregiver’s expectations

- Ask caregivers what they are looking to achieve with the treatment
- How realistic is this?
  - Age of dog
  - Chronicity of problem
  - Learning history
  - Capacity of caregiver
  - Risk factors within the home- children, other animals
  - Bite risk

Medication won’t treat physical health issues

- 28-82% of behaviour cases involve pain
- Pain = aversive sensory and emotional experience
  - Results in protective actions and learned avoidance, altered social behaviour
  - Future proof against it occurring again, like anxiety
  - Worsens negative emotional load
  - Higher anxiety states in people lead to higher pain scores
- Should be a differential diagnosis for any behaviour change
  - Aggression, noise sensitivity, separation anxiety

Investigation of pain

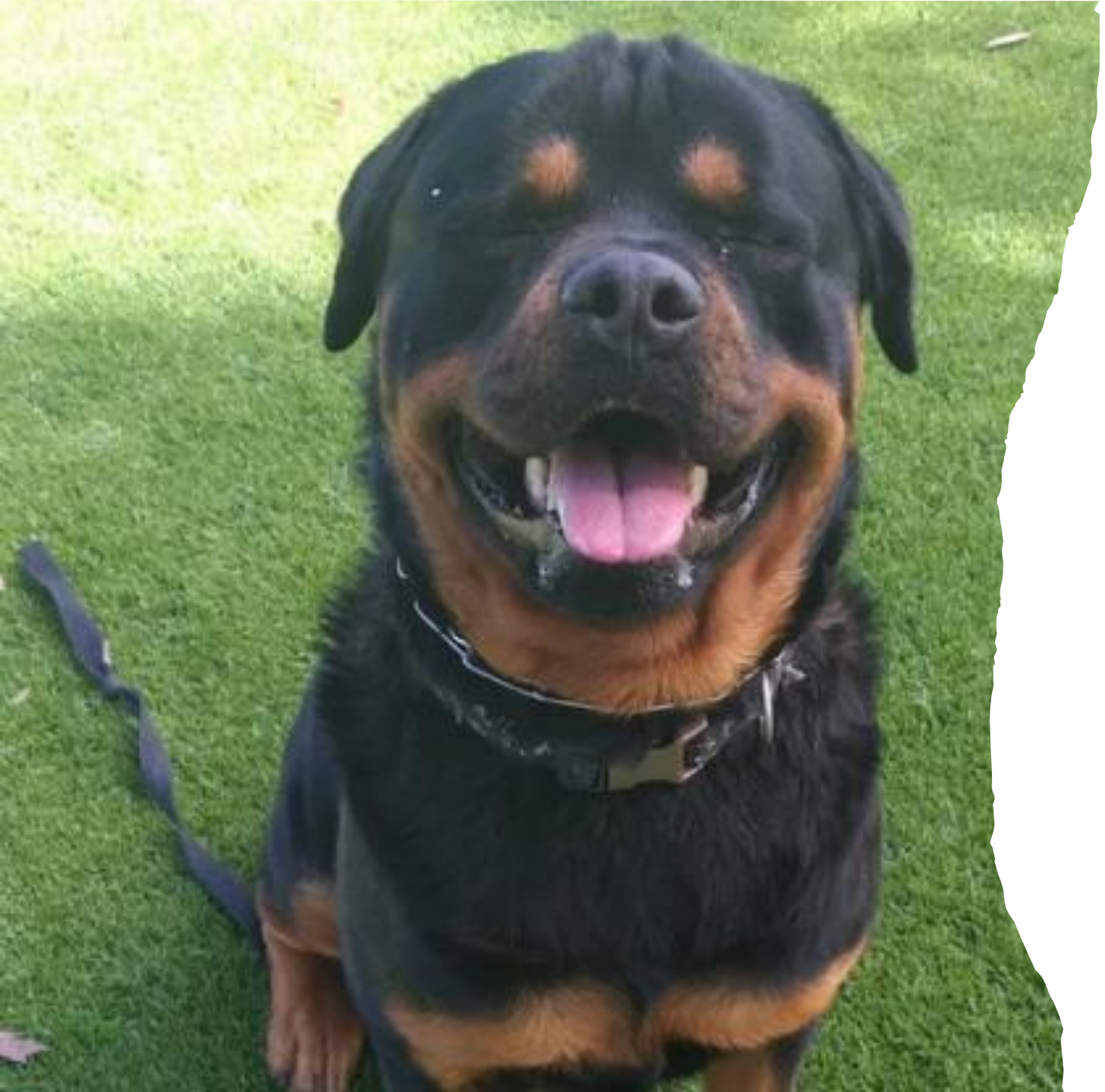
- Tough, sometimes not obvious
- Watch gait
- Common ‘tells’
  - Humping, mouthing, unsettled can mean hip dysplasia
  - Licking
    - Feels good temporarily + more attention from caregivers, reinforced
    - Can increase due to increased stress of pain, could continue after pain is gone
- Pain relief trial- NSAIDs, at least two weeks
- Referral to Rehab Vet

Medication can’t train a new behaviour

- Positive reinforcement of calm behaviours in presence of the trigger
- Repetitions will allow the animal to practice feeling calm
- Focus on the emotion underneath the behaviour
- Provide alternative behaviour the animal can do instead
    - Sniffing, looking at caregiver, settle on bed

Your local R+ trainer should be your BFF

- R+ = positive reinforcement
- BFF= best friends forever
- Good trainers will:
  - Promote veterinary care and work with caregivers to facilitate exams
    - Muzzle training, co-operative care training, be present at vet visits
  - Understand the need for necessary medication
  - Refer to your clinic if they are concerned about physical issues- pain
  - Not worsen underlying anxieties or fears through punishment-based methods
  - Help you assess the behaviour in situ and provide feedback
  - Help clients that are unsure about referral to VB or rehab vet feel better about exploring those options

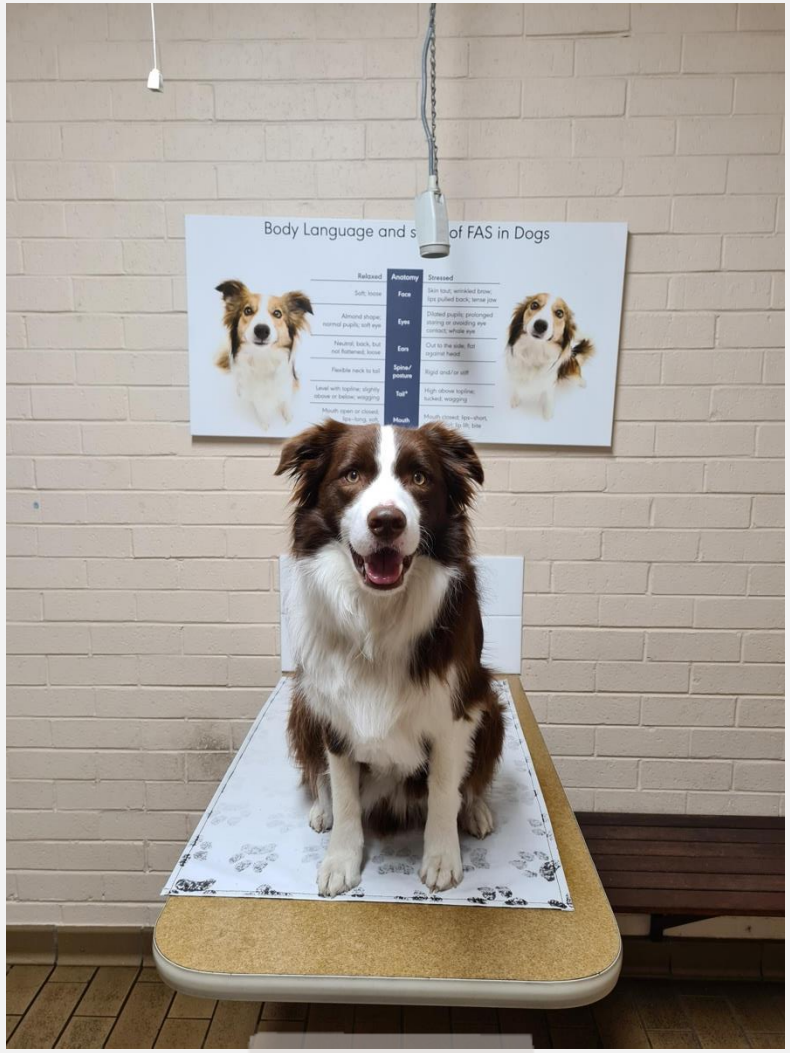


How to pick your trainer

- Avoid
  - Alpha, pack
  - Varied training techniques for the individual= balanced
  - Board and Train
  - Voice tone use
  - Anti behaviour medication
  - Behaviours or improvements are guaranteed
  - Prong, e-collar, slip leads or check chains in photos
- Local
- Qualified
  - 25+ years of experience doesn’t count!
  - IMDT, APDT, Delta, Cert IV AVT, Member of PPG

Removing medication

Always a possibility if whole plan is followed
Looking for caregivers to rate the improvement from baseline as 80%
Want to have a stable 6-12 months at 80%
Consistent, positive behaviours in face of triggers
Behaviours manageable for caregivers and pets
Slow reduction by 25% every 3-6 months
Sometimes not possible



Anxiety within the vet clinic

- Extrapolation of issues we are seeing in society
- Individuals lack resilience and are more sensitive, therefore tolerance for handling is lower
- Societal perceptions about animal comfort have changed for the better
  - Described as family members compared with just pets
  - Caregivers identify signs of anxiety, fear and don’t want pets to feel that
  - Pet professionals more aware
  - Understanding of long-term impact of stressful handling on the brain
  - Concerned more about workplace safety

Pre Vet Pharmaceuticals

- Should we be using them as much as we are? Yes…but further sedation is likely
- Night before? Not always
- Trazodone?
- Clonidine before domitor
- Oral domitor 0.04mg/kg, do it early
- Wait longer than 24hrs if possible, especially for cats
- Pregabalin 25mg for cats

In summary

- Prevalence of anxiety is increasing in our pet population due to a confluence of factors
- Medication is warranted, however needs to form one part of a holistic plan to allow permanent change of behaviour
- Use PVPs within the vet clinic to help treatment and handling

VetTech® Australia

PRIME100

Questions?

References

- https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/overview/prevalence-and-impact-of-mental-illness
- https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-12/anxious-pets-dogs-cats-get-anxiety-too/100896044
- https://avmajournals.avma.org/view/journals/javma/263/7/javma.24.06.0412.xml
- Bouma EMC, Reijgwart ML, Martens P, Dijkstra A. Cat owners' anthropomorphic perceptions of feline emotions and interpretation of photographs. Appl Anim Behav Sci. 2024;270:106150. doi:10.1016/j.applanim.2023.106150.
- Torrico TJ, Abdijadid S. Neuroanatomy, limbic system [Internet]. In: StatPearls. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2025 Jan– [updated 2023 Jul 17; cited 2025 Jun 21]. Available from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK538491/
- Interaction Design Foundation - IxDF. Our three brains – the emotional brain [Internet]. Interaction Design Foundation - IxDF; 2025 Mar 10 [cited 2025 Jun 21]. Available from: https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/our-three-brains-the-emotional-brain
- Orji LC, Ita UA. Amygdala hijack: contemporary insights into causes, correlates and consequences. Afr J Health Nurs Midwifery. 2024;7(3):102–11. doi:10.52589/AJHNM-KQM0NM27.
- McConnel l P. Chirag Patel and the Bucket Game [Internet]. [cited 2023 Oct 1]. Available from https://www.patriciamcconnell.com/theotherendoftheleash/chirag-patel-and-the-bucket-game
- Fear Free. Fear Free Pets. [Internet]. [cited 2023 Oct 01]. Available from: https://fearfreepets.com/
- Landsberg GM, Radosta L, Ackerman L, editors. *Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat*. 4th ed. Elsevier/Saunders Ltd; 2023. ISBN: 978-0-702-08214-6.