MEET THE AUTHOR

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Jarom Vogel

Repairing a Broken Human-Animal Bond

Sometimes working in behavior medicine can feel like fighting a losing battle. As a veterinary behavior nurse I strive to strengthen and improve the human-animal bond in every patient and client I encounter, but by the time most of our clients find us they have exhausted funds, trialed different types of training techniques, and are at a crossroads with their pet. Unfortunately, seeking out a veterinary behavior practice is typically the end of the road for most clients and the relationship between the owner and pet is hanging by a thread.

These bonds are often broken due to numerous behavior problems (e.g., destruction to the home, inappropriate elimination, aggression). A 2013 study found that 65% of owners who relinquished their pets did so for a behavior reason. This study also supported the use of positive reinforcement; clients reported less satisfaction with behavior after using punishment-based methods, which can also be damaging to the bond.[1]

The role of a veterinary behavior nurse can be crucial in mending and restrengthening this bond. Critical skills include effective communication, the ability to demonstrate and coach the client to understand the prescribed behavioral therapy plans, and proven flexibility with learning styles for both the owner and the pet.[2] In my practice, I describe my role as the "Case Manager." I will be the one each client is in contact with the most frequently. It is my job to relay information clearly and effectively to the veterinarian and be sure that the entire behavior team (veterinarian, trainer, and owner) is working toward the common goal of restoring the bond.

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

Counseling aspects of marriage/family therapy and behavioral medicine have many commonalities that drive toward repairing bonds.[2] One of the most profound similarities is how change occurs in the context of treatment. In behavior medicine, our clients can come in with negative thoughts, anger, and fears associated with their pet. My goal as part of the veterinary behavior team is to change the emotional experience of the pet *along* with the pet owner. My first questions when a family walks into our practice and their pet has been displaying owner-related aggression is:

- How are *you* feeling about your pet?
- Do *you* feel safe in your home?
- What is *your* current relationship with the pet?

The client needs to express their own personal concerns if treatment is going to be attempted. Behavioral therapy is essential, but the context and triggers of the problem are less important until a more positive association with the pet can be formed. After the veterinarian discusses the behavioral diagnoses, I will typically review them in a more down-to-earth fashion so the entire family can understand the emotional and/or cognitive concerns their pet has developed. With this, the family can begin to relate to the pet and see things "through their eyes." This can jump-start the process of rebuilding the bond.

The veterinary behavior nurse should be able to identify and empathize with the fear and anxiety the pet and client may be experiencing. This is the first step in modifying both of their behaviors.

HEARTFELT CARE

A second similarity to human-based therapy is the barriers associated with clients.[2] Most of our clients walk into the consultation room and expect to be told they did something wrong. They may be defensive, anxious, and closed off. If this is present, they may be reluctant to give a detailed behavioral history, which can impact treatment. Fear may also play a factor; clients may not want to share events of aggression as they do not want to euthanize their pet. They feel as if they will be judged and then be forced to make an unwanted decision. One of my strongest skills as a veterinary behavior nurse is gaining the trust of clients and building a strong rapport early on. I want each client—and pet—to have a wonderful experience with our clinic but I also want to have a strong connection with that client, share empathy, and understand each issue from their perspective. Most clients may be at the end of their rope, but there is an inch left of that rope to work with. I think of the rope as the bond between the owner and the client. Hang on to that tiny piece—it is still technically intact! Each client walks into the practice for a reason, even if there is only a tiny strand of the bond left. If you can open them up, connect, and gain their trust, you can begin to reshape the negativity they feel toward their pet and repair the relationship.

One of the most important terms when repairing the human animal bond is empathy, the ability to have a deep emotional understanding of another's feelings and experiences.[2] This is a crucial ability for a veterinary behavior nurse to have for success with any client or patient. The veterinary behavior nurse should be able to identify and empathize with the fear and anxiety the pet and client may be experiencing. This is the first step in modifying both of their behaviors.

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Being able to "take a walk in someone else's shoes" is a vital step in increasing the human-animal bond.

Psychologist Marshall Rosenberg stated it best: "when we understand the needs that motivate ourselves and others' behaviors, we have no enemies."[2] This is important to recognize when working to rebuild or strengthen a human-animal bond. It is important for the client and veterinary behavior team to see things from the pet's perspective. The client can then learn that the pet is not their enemy. The pet is not performing these behaviors to spite them. The pet is fearful, stressed, or anxious and may be trying to keep itself safe. Being able to "take a walk in someone else's shoes" is a vital step in increasing the human-animal bond.

Mending the human-animal bond is not an easy conquest. It takes the expertise of a strong, educated, and skilled veterinary behavior team to even begin to reunite and mend the connection between the client and pet. When working in a general practice, if there are any signs that the human-animal bond is suffering with a client and patient, the team should be made aware so the veterinarian can make the referral to a veterinary behavior practice. As veterinary team members, we all want to save the lives of pets. This begins with keeping a strong bond between the owner and pet. Giving appropriate and science-based recommendations on training and behavioral therapy can be the first step in this process, starting with puppy and kitten visits. If we all work toward a common goal, we can make a difference. TVN

References

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