



CALM AND COLLECTED

Identify the source of a client's frustration before engaging and finding potential solutions.



MEET THE AUTHOR

Jamie Rauscher, RVT
*Animal Hospital of Towne Lake,
Woodstock, Ga.*

Handling Angry Clients

Stresses from the pandemic and beyond have caused emotions to run high among both staff and clients in veterinary practices across the country. The restrictions that have been put into place in order to help keep everyone safe and healthy—along with the fear of the unknown and health concerns—have contributed to the emotional outbursts we are experiencing with (or from) clients. Unfortunately, handling angry clients has become more and more of an issue.

Jamie is an RVT from Atlanta, Georgia. She works in a general practice/emergency room practice as the Medical Manager of a staff of almost 70. Currently, Jamie is the President of Georgia's Technician and Assistant Association. She has her Fear Free Elite Certification and Human Animal Bond Certification, as well as her Animal Hospice and Palliative Care Certification. Her interests include client education, pain management, anesthesia, patient care, and emergency and critical care. Jamie has presented several case reports at national conferences, spoken at her state technician conferences, and has numerous blogs published. She is married, has a son, as well as a golden retriever and 3 cats.



I always try to think of the following when in a situation with an upset client: Why are they angry? Who should be talking to them? What can you do, if anything, for them to resolve the issue at hand?

IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

Finding the underlying cause of a client's frustration should be the No. 1 priority. This will also ultimately determine whether you can fix the problem. A client's anger can stem from a multitude of reasons: is there a financial aspect to their concern? Are they upset that their pet is sick and they cannot afford to care for it? Are they mourning a companion that passed away and are facing payment for services? Were they unsatisfied with the outcome of diagnostic testing? Is your clinic running behind that day? Are COVID-19–related protocols contributing to their frustration? In reality, we may never know what that client is experiencing that has led to their anger and frustration.

In my experience, money seems to be the main reason for many angry outbursts from clients. We have all heard: “if you really loved animals, you would do it for free.” While we do love animals, no clinic can provide services for free. But you can always provide helpful resources for clients that need financial assistance. Veterinary financing services such as CareCredit (carecredit.com) or Scratchpay (scratchpay.com) are the first options the author offers to clients. Perhaps instead of the initial treatment plan provided for the patient, evaluate whether it's possible to offer a more conservative option that considers the client's financial limitations and patient health. Also, consider how the client will be able to access prescriptions and medications. Finding a way to offer prescriptions that allows a client to use a GoodRx coupon rather than going solely through the clinic's pharmacy might work in some scenarios.

If a client's pet has passed away, consider the care performed and services rendered. Your coworkers gave it their all, as they always do, no matter the outcome. If you start comping services and giving things away for free, it can be taken as an admittance of fault, and your coworkers may perceive it as you undervaluing their work. Use your resources in this matter, such as AVMA PLIT insurance (avmaplit.com) and corporate legal services. Always remember to support your coworkers in these matters. It will go a long way toward earning their support and trust.



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Every veterinary professional knows that performing diagnostic testing does not guarantee a definitive outcome. However, clients do not always understand this and must be educated. If the results of a diagnostic test offer ambiguity, come up with a plan for your clients on what happens next and what needs to be done to get them the answers they seek. A referral to a specialist is always an option that should be made known to your clients.

Busy day? Running behind? Be transparent and let your clients know what is happening in your clinic. If the delay is apparent, call your clients in advance to make them aware of how it will affect their appointment. You could also offer drop-off care if appropriate for the necessary treatment. Remember that during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many clinics utilizing curbside service, separation between your client and their pet will cause more stress. Help them realize how well their pet is doing without them. Use FaceTime or Zoom for your appointments to let clients still see what is happening behind the scenes. Even sending a simple picture through text or email goes a long way.

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

When you have an angry client, decide who should be communicating with them and why. If you have a medical concern that a client has brought up, perhaps a veterinarian or seasoned credentialed veterinary nurse should be talking to your client—someone who can explain what has happened and why. An office manager is another alternative depending upon the situation. If customer service issues such as scheduling or staff complaints escalate, it is best to get your practice manager involved. I believe that a veterinarian should not be talking to a client about financial issues. Rather, this should be the responsibility of a veterinary nurse if it involves a treatment plan or a practice manager if services have been provided and your client cannot pay

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CAREER CHALLENGES



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for them. Allowing the attending veterinarian to discuss finances with your client can muddy the waters between the client and the doctor, allowing them to potentially be guilted into not charging for services or discounting them in order to appease the client.

Understanding the cause of a client's anger is a great starting point. Sometimes people just need to vent. Once they have verbalized their frustrations, they can move on and will be happy—or at least in a better place than they were before. Come into the situation with calm confidence. If a client gets the sense that you do not know what you are talking about, the situation will only get worse. I always thank clients for their input and attempt to use it as a teaching case if able to do so. But you will always have that client who just cannot let things go. At future visits they may continue to bring up their grievances and continue to express their displeasure with your clinic and staff. If this is the case, your clinic may not be the best for them. If you are to terminate your relationship with your client, do so professionally. Be prepared but do not engage in their verbal bashing on social media. Always try to be the bigger person in these matters. Remember: how you respond is how you will be remembered.

Handling angry clients is less of a science and more of an art form—one that takes thick skin and years of experience to master. Sometimes you will be joyous in the success you have, other times you will feel like a failure no matter the outcome. But always remember to respond to your client's complaints to let them know they have been heard. If they feel ignored, their feelings will intensify. There is no master plan, class, or skill set that can fully prepare you to deal with things like this, but a foundation of strong communication skills and conflict management will put you in the best mindset for success. Each situation will be different to a degree. Gaining experience, seeking support from other people in similar situations, and always remaining calm are the best methods. **TVN**