



ETHICS/WELFARE

Rejuvenating the Human-Animal Bond in the Care of Senior Veterinary Patients

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Recognizing and supporting the human-animal bond is central to the work done in veterinary medicine and plays a vital and beneficial role in strengthening this relationship even as pets age.



We know that the human–animal bond helps reduce stress and promotes the release of beneficial neurochemicals, including dopamine and oxytocin, which support energy, elevate mood, and enhance overall wellbeing.¹ This bond also encourages healing and physical activity following injury or trauma, helps reduce loneliness, and is associated with increased longevity in both humans and animals.²

As time passes, the human–animal bond often strengthens through shared experiences that foster compassion, trust, and daily connection.³ Despite the strong attachment, the bond can become strained when owners begin to observe and try to make sense of the cognitive and physiologic changes associated with aging in their pets.⁴

As veterinary professionals, we recognize that a pet's senior years should be treated with sensitivity in regard to tailoring care to fit both the client and the patient's mental and physical needs. This is most effectively done by establishing a relationship that relies on trust and understanding to gain insight into the history and physiologic changes that take place gradually for each individual patient.⁵

For veterinary nurses, acknowledging and fostering this connection provides the opportunity to help strengthen that bond and make the time pets and their owners have left together more meaningful.

HOW AGING ALTERS THE HUMAN–ANIMAL BOND

Changes in mobility, cognition, chronic pain, and other disease processes not only affect the daily lives of aging pets but put an additional burden on the caregiver as they try to determine what quality of life looks like for their more fragile pet. The anxiety associated with administering additional medications, modifying the home environment, adjusting daily routines, and managing financial demands can be substantial. These stressors can further strain the human–animal bond by altering the client's perception of what constitutes “normal” and by heightening the perceived severity of their pet's suffering.⁶

Chronic pain can lead to mobility and behavioral changes, and these signs may initially go undetected or unreported by owners as pain manifests differently in each individual animal. Signs such as isolation,

decreased appetite, anxiety, and avoidance of normal activities are often common signs of pain.⁷ Educating owners about what to monitor in their pet's everyday routine helps them detect signs earlier and seek the veterinary care needed to keep their pet comfortable and reduce overall pathologic decline.⁶

Cognitive dysfunction in patients can be either minor or significant deterioration of memory, attention, or executive function that may progress over time and vary in presentation. Normal aging includes gradual cognitive changes but allows pets to maintain daily routines, while significant dysfunction can negatively affect a pet's daily way of life. Owners may observe changes such as house soiling, disorientation, altered sleep cycles, increased fear or anxiety, and differences in social interaction.⁷

Conversations with owners about the presentation of these changes and how they may manifest allow the client to distinguish between normal and abnormal signs. Treatment of these conditions typically involves a combination of therapies recommended by the veterinarian, which can improve overall quality of life for the pet when owners can manage them effectively.⁸

The presence of 2 or more diseases in aging pets is common and the likelihood of this increases as they live longer. While no multimodal index for dogs and cats is currently widely accepted or used, comorbidities such as heart disease, dental disease, kidney disease, and neoplasia are often observed in senior patients.⁹ For example, a pet with chronic kidney disease and osteoarthritis may require fluid therapy, mobility support, dietary adjustments, and multiple medications, each with different dosing schedules and monitoring needs. Navigating these overlapping treatment plans can elevate caregiver stress and increase the complexity of daily routines due to additional monitoring requirements, more frequent veterinary follow-ups, and a greater degree of involvement.¹⁰

TIPS FOR REBUILDING THE BOND BETWEEN CLIENTS AND SENIOR PATIENTS

Tip 1: Listen and Acknowledge Shared Stories

Clients often share with the veterinary team many of



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the challenges they may face with their pet's changing physical and mental state with frustration and despair. One of the most effective ways the veterinary team can support clients is by listening and demonstrating empathy through longer appointment times, regular communication, and more frequent check-ins. This provides clients with pets experiencing senior health transitions with adequate time to discuss cognitive enrichment, mobility support, and pain management or other medication changes.⁵

Tip 2: Suggest and Empower Clients to Document What Is Changing in Their Pet's Daily Life

A strong bond can help owners be more attentive to fluctuations in their pet's daily patterns.¹¹ Tracking changes in a pet's daily routine helps the owner recognize age-related shifts, while also appreciating the time spent together engaging in meaningful activities. Journals can provide valuable information for the veterinary team to manage evolving health concerns.¹² Videos can also be useful for capturing subtle changes in posture or documenting mental or physical events that owners may have difficulty interpreting.¹³

Tip 3: Offer Resources

Provide resources such as caregiver support groups, hospice information, and reputable online platforms so clients can educate themselves and feel proactive. Websites such as the International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care (iaahpc.org) and Lap of Love (lapoflove.com) offer tools for managing quality of life, grief, and age-related symptoms. The AAHA senior care guidelines (go.navc.com/3PTdLmZ) provide further guidance for the entire veterinary team.

Tip 4: Encourage the Client to Remain Present and Maintain Realistic Expectations for the Time They Have Left With Their Pet

This may include establishing special daily rituals (e.g., snuggling, grooming, feeding), scheduling senior "pet dates" for continued socialization, or creating a short-term bucket list of things they want to do with their pet. Encourage age-appropriate activities such as shorter walks, puzzle toys, or gentle toy play.¹³ Help clients understand that activities may require a slower pace and that environmental adjustments can support a more graceful aging transition.⁵

Tip 5: Foster a Team Culture That Prioritizes Bond-Centered Care

Highlight the bond you help strengthen every day by sharing familiar cases during team meetings. Explore practice-wide changes that can better support and nurture this connection for every patient (e.g., Fear Free practices, senior care guidelines, longer appointment times, routine follow-up calls). Share thank you notes and cards from clients who value the care their pets have received. Reflect on how your practice can offer meaningful support to clients during difficult diagnoses, while also celebrating the moments of progress that extend the time they share with their pets. Make space to build trust with clients and respect the efforts they can or cannot make to support their pets' wellbeing.¹⁴

SUMMARY

The human–animal bond is a remarkable and unique relationship that enriches the veterinary team–client–patient relationship. By deepening the understanding of this connection and how it changes as pets age, veterinary nurses and their teams can apply simple, intentional strategies to help preserve and revitalize this bond during the most meaningful stages of an aging pet's life. **TVN**

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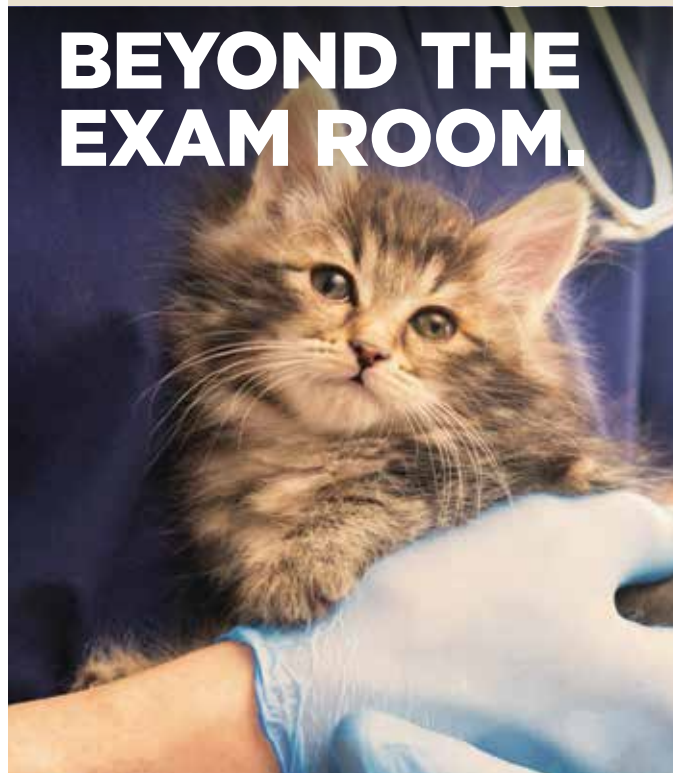
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Dana is a licensed veterinary technician in North Carolina with more than 30 years of experience in the profession. She holds certifications in Fear Free practices and the human-animal bond and is recognized as a Cat Friendly Veterinary Professional. Dana is currently an instructional technologist in Purdue University's online veterinary technology program, where she integrates current, evidence-based practices into her courses while supporting and inspiring the next generation of veterinary technicians. As a committed lifelong learner, Dana is passionate about exploring how veterinary teams can strengthen the human-animal bond by deepening their understanding of its benefits for all involved.



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