**I Can’t STRESS This Enough………**

Most of our shaggy friends love coming to see us. But what do you do when they don’t? We make it so they want to! How? Well, that takes some help from you. We can teach you a technique called counter conditioning so your pet doesn’t stress over veterinary visits or other situations. Counter conditioning links something good (food, praise, play) to something not so enjoyable.

Trying to get a cat into a carrier is probably number one on the top 10 list of “things owners dread.” However, look at it from your cat’s perspective. Most cats only see the carrier once a year. It is typically hauled out of the attic or basement, full of cobwebs, and even sometimes still containing dried feces or urine from the last fiasco. By now the cat is getting signals that something is up. You may be running late and already envisioning the struggle to come. This then stresses out your cat. If you are lucky enough to catch them they suddenly grow 12 legs, none of which want to go into the carrier. After a struggle they are taken for a car ride, something most cats don’t do on a regular basis. Why are we then surprised that the cat may develop negative feelings toward the carrier?

We can change this by making the carrier a fun place to be. Start by leaving the carrier out in the open so the kitty sees it on a daily basis. Once the cat ignores the carrier you can begin throwing toys or kibbles near the carrier or playing with a laser light around the carrier gradually working up to feeding the pet in the carrier. After the pet voluntarily goes into the carrier without any hesitation you may shut the door but immediately open it back up. Reward the cat for both going in and coming out. Eventually work up to closing the door, picking up the carrier and walking around the house. Often covering the carrier with a towel will help calm the cat as well. If the cat seems stressed at any time stop and go back to the previous step. Always reward your pets for doing the behavior you want.

We can also take cues from the cat itself. Happy, relaxed cats rub their faces on vertical objects. They are releasing a pheromone (a hormone that can be smelled) from glands located on their cheeks. Feliway is a product that mimics this scent and it can be sprayed inside the carrier and also on the towel covering the carrier to help decrease stress.

You can train your dog to enjoy car rides, veterinary visits, and teach him to do almost anything by using positive reinforcement and being consistent. Again, the key is to not push your pet to the point that he is stressed. For example, if your pet is scared just looking at the car you may walk him past the car while playing, or feeding treats so your dog is focused on you and not the car. As time progresses you can move closer and closer to the car but if you note any signs of stress (panting with lips pulled back, ears back, whites of eyes showing) go back to the step where the pet was relaxed and then proceed slower. If your pet is fine in the car but panics when the car is started then put your pet in the car, start the car, immediately turn off the car, and reward your pet when he settles back down. If your pet is fine in the car but not coming into the veterinary hospital you can start by driving past the hospital, again, rewarding only relaxed behavior. Once the pet does not get stressed driving past, pull into the parking lot then leave without getting the pet out of the car. The next step would be to pull into the parking lot, let the pet out of the car and just walk around until they are relaxed. Next bring the pet inside then turn around and come back out, each time only praising relaxed behavior. We strongly encourage socialization visits where you just stop by with your pet and we feed treats, give praise, etc. so not every experience is negative. We encourage you to bring your pet hungry and bring a zip lock with their food so we can spoil them. Remember that whenever transporting an animal they should ideally be secured at all times using a carrier or a pet seatbelt.

One of the best things you can do for your dog is to teach your pet to “relax” or “settle” on command. To do this praise them with the trigger word when they relax on their own. When they take that deep breath just before laying down give them lots of praise using the trigger word you want. Again stay consistent. If you can teach your dog to “settle” you can drastically reduce their stress in unfamiliar situations. At the first sign of stress you can command your pet to “settle.” Adaptil, a product similar to Feliway, mimics the pheromone female dogs release while nursing. It has a calming effect and is often very helpful.

You may do multiple sessions a day but try to keep them to approximately 5 minutes each time. Cheerios are a great training treat as they are low in calories to keep the extra weight off and they are quickly ingested so you can reward your pet but immediately move on with the training session.

At Antrim Veterinary Hospital we do numerous things to try to reduce the stress on both you and your pet. Our trained staff uses fear free techniques while restraining your pet for exams and diagnostics. We assess each patient and will go as slow as needed to build up your pet’s trust with us. Exam rooms are thoroughly cleaned after every patient to help eliminate disease and odors and are then sprayed with Feliway or Adaptil. We offer flexible appointment times and often are able to get you in the same day. Dreading carrying that heavy carrier in or nervous about being able to handle that rambunctious puppy? Let us know when you make your appointment and we will be happy to bring your pet in from your vehicle.

We can assess your pet’s personality and stress level and make an individualized behavior modification plan for them. By investing some time at home and at the hospital we can work as a team to make your visits something both you and your pet look forward to. We love seeing your four footed friends, let’s make sure they enjoy seeing us just as much!