



Could Your Pet Be Depressed?

What To Do If You Think Your Pet Is Feeling Down

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS

We all know pets can help ease depression in humans, but, as our pets' advocates, we also need to be alert to changes in their behavior that might signal their own bout of depression—or even a medical problem affecting their disposition.

Symptoms associated with depression can actually indicate a medical problem.

"I have heard my clients refer to their pets as 'depressed' to describe a variety of observations, including the pet being more quiet, more withdrawn or distant, less hungry, or less energetic than usual," says Dr. Liz Stelow, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist with the Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital at UC Davis in California. "I think it's an effort to apply the clinical signs of human depression to pets as a way to explain what they're observing."

But, she adds, medical causes like pain, chronic illness, and itching affect pets similarly.

Dr. Julia Tomlinson, a board-certified specialist in canine sports medicine and rehabilitation who owns Twin Cities Animal Rehabilitation and Sports Medicine Clinic in Minnesota, concurs, telling parents who suspect their pet is depressed to have their pet checked for pain.

"Pain and depression are linked," she says. "Anything that preoccupies the mind [can trigger depression]. When the pet has chronic pain or aggravating input such as constant itchiness, it overwhelms the central nervous system. The pet's other needs cannot be met because most energy is put into the pain or itching."

The symptoms of depression and pain, especially, are very similar and can look the same to pet parents, so see your veterinarian to check for pain or disease first.

"It's important to rule out medical problems before deciding whether behavioral intervention is appropriate," according to Dr. Stelow.

If you notice any of the following signs in your pet, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian to rule out potential medical conditions that can mimic the signs of depression in pets:

- Not looking up and watching household activity
- Altered activity level
- Decreased interaction with humans and other pets in the household
- Crabbiness or snapping at people
- Decreased tolerance of younger pets and kids
- Hiding, particularly for cats
- Eliminating outside of the litterbox or loss of housetraining
- Lethargy
- Change in sleep habits
- Appetite changes

Pets may suffer from depression following a triggering event.

For pets we describe as "depressed," absent a medical cause, you may be able to trace their mood change back to a triggering event—good or bad.

Social-emotional triggers that can affect pets include:

- Schedule changes (such as pet parents spending more time away from home)
- Change in your attentiveness or attitude
- Moving
- Stress among household members
- Addition or loss of a human or fellow animal companion (yes, pets can grieve)

The restriction of a pet's usual activities because of surgery or illness can also be a potential triggering event. Your older pet might have pain from osteoarthritis, your dog or cat could be on a restricted diet or in pain following surgery, or your feisty puppy or kitten might be restricted from the activities she loves until a broken limb heals.

"If a pet is withdrawn or reluctant to engage in normal activities, he should definitely see a vet, even if the owner is sure the change is due to loss of a family member or other huge disruption," says Dr. Stelow. "The fact is that medical problems can arise, either alongside the stress from the changes or coincidentally."

If you think your pet might be depressed, schedule a visit with your veterinarian.

Depression can lead to other health issues.

While there's a lot of overlap between signs of depression and injury or illness, depression itself might contribute to additional problems.

For one, it can indirectly lead to secondary health issues when pets become sedentary. Because muscle movement is vital, sedentary pets could further stiffen already stiff joints through lack of use. This may contribute to weight gain, which can affect everything from arthritis to cancer.

In younger pets, the long-term issues tend to be more psychological. If a



young pet gets injured, the situation may be temporary but cause her to miss crucial developmental and social periods and become fearful.

"For the pet who shows long-term changes in behavior, there is probably underlying anxiety or fear," says Dr. Stelow, who adds that this anxiety can further impact a pet's physical health. (For more about how fear, anxiety, and stress can affect cats, see the article on page 10.)

To help prevent chronic issues, visiting your vet as soon as you think your pet may be suffering from depression is essential. Not only can your veterinarian rule out medical causes, but he or she can discuss behavioral interventions or refer you to a veterinary behaviorist. If your pet has already experienced changes in behavior, it's not too late to ask your veterinarian for assistance.

You can help your pet feel better.

Once your veterinarian has ruled out medical issues, you have many options at home to help your pet recover from depression. "Most pets are motivated by food and owner attention, both of which can be modified to accommodate medical problems," Dr. Stelow says.

Try these ideas:

- Introduce food puzzles and other

strategies that make pets work for their food, like freezing canned food or scattering kibble around a small room or in a pen (if the pet's physical condition allows for this).

- Hold interactive training sessions, specifically tailored to avoid exacerbating any medical problems.
- Provide environmental enrichment by rearranging a room or changing its scent (make these changes gradually for cats and anxious pets, or they could reject them or become more anxious).
- Invite outside stimuli in by making sure pets have easy access to a safe window.
- Explore the outdoors safely by using a stroller or pull-cart.
- Rotate toys and food puzzles.
- Up your touch input for pets whose senses are diminished.
- Protect your pet from difficult human emotions.

If your pet still seems depressed after a few weeks, let your veterinarian know. He or she may recommend additional interventions or may prescribe medication to help boost your pet's mood.

Andrea Vardaro Tucker, a board-certified editor in the life sciences and HealthyPet copy editor, and her human family had to get creative last year to keep up their dog's spirits after surgery.