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Incorporating Fear FreeSM into the Veterinary Practice

The mission of Fear FreeSM is to alleviate fear, anxiety, and stress (FAS) in pets and educate and inspire the people that care for them. The Fear FreeSM Initiative was created by Dr. Marty Becker, “America’s veterinarian.”

The Initiative is focused on the fact that pets need veterinary professionals to look after their

- physical well-being AND
- emotional well-being

Why is Fear FreeSM so important? Reducing patient fear, anxiety, and stress (FAS)

- creates more manageable, cooperative patients
- creates a safer, more efficient work environment
- strengthens client relationships
- increases client retention and patient visits
- improves veterinary professional job satisfaction

Education programs through the Fear Free website (www.fearfreepets.com) and onsite continual education programs provide tools, protocols, procedures, guidelines, and other great resources to tailor to your clients and your team. Most importantly, the benefits to the pet, owner, and veterinary team are stress reduction; decreased conflict with patients, clients, and team members; and increased compliance with pets into practice for visits.

Fear Free accomplishes these changes by addressing behavior: “Behavior is medicine; Fear Free is better medicine.” These changes create bonding within the veterinary team, with our clients, and with our patients while keeping everyone safer and more emotionally stable!

Fear Free 101: Refer to the Glossary of Fear FreeSM Terms at the end of this session proceedings.

Fear, Anxiety, and Stress (FAS) in our patients creates obstacles to optimum veterinary health care, well-being, and safety for all involved. Communication with the owner, the pet, and the veterinary health care team is essential for success.

The Cornerstones of Fear FreeSM are Considerate Approach (CA) and Gentle Control (GC).

Utilizing a Considerate Approach (CA) when interacting with patients and clients takes into consideration ALL of the sensory and environmental inputs a patient might experience and uses this information to approach the patient in the calmest, least confrontational way possible. Always using Gentle Control (GC) when administering medical care ensures the veterinary team comfortably and safely positions the patient to allow care to proceed without undue FAS.

What is stress and why is it so important?

Stress is caused by stressors; events that disrupt the body’s normal function. Stress is not necessarily maladaptive if a body can quickly return to a normal baseline state. However, some stressors can also create fear, anxiety and stress (FAS). If FAS is ongoing it can be detrimental to the patient’s health and well-being. Therefore, our GOALS are to:

- learn about the different causes of FAS during a veterinary visit
and
- how to prevent or change FAS

Are Fear, Anxiety, and Stress (FAS) Always Present?

Yes. FAS occur along a continuum from barely stressed at all, to severely stressed with compromised well-being and safety of all involved. As veterinary professionals and patient advocates we need to:

- understand early species specific signaling of FAS



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- help owners create Fear Free transport to and from the hospital (Fear Free visits start and end at home!)
 - adjust reception and waiting area to decrease FAS
 - personalize plans for each patient based on their expression of FAS (EMR-Emotional Medical Record)
 - create an entire hospital plan to create a Fear Free environment, and
 - encourage happy visits where no procedures occur and reinforcement of Fear Free visit does occur
- This happens with a good understanding of FAS in cats and dogs (which is very different) and good communication between our team members and our pet parents.

Step 1: The veterinary team MUST be on board with Fear FreeSM concepts. All team members must demonstrate compassion, confidence, and competence with Fear FreeSM concepts.

Step 2: Build a team with the pet owner and family to work with their pet toward an end goal of a Fear FreeSM veterinary visit. The plan involves the physical plant, pre-visit, visit, and post-visit. This means a dedication to a significant amount of communication with the pet owner.

Aids for Step 2:

1. Educate the client about the goals of Fear Free visits – why they are in the best interest for the pet: medically, safety, and behaviorally
2. Encourage them to utilize www.fearfreehappyhomes.com to learn more and read up on tips and techniques that interest them at home.
3. Discuss the pet's use of body language and how it indicates relaxation, anxiety, stress, etc. This is a touchy subject because owners often misinterpret "Fluffy's" behavior as one of happy excitement when it's really one of anxious stress 'I just want to get out of here, take me home!' IMPORTANT: Use terms that reflect that the practice wants to help the owner help their pet, not that you are finger wagging they are poor owners!
4. Discuss the owner's and the family/home environment as reflections of stress, happiness, relaxation, overstimulation, etc.

NOTE: As you advance up the aids for Step 2, be wary of the clients' reception and responses. Too much, too soon can lose a client or put someone off. Gentle touch can also mean gentle talk with clients! Each client is different and you will need to learn to read each one to see what works best AND WHO works best with that person. It may not be the veterinarian or the even the credentialed veterinary technician! **Include notes in your EMR!**

As you talk with your clients about Fear Free visits, you'll want to include information that may eventually lead to why you might need to include pre-visit pharmacologics (PVP), nutraceuticals, and/or sedation with anxiolytics or more to accomplish any tasks needed during a visit. All with the precipice that you want to keep "Fluffy" as comfortable and non-stressed as possible. Discuss the terminology 'Considerate Approach' and 'Gentle Control' and how you'll use these every time you see their pet:

Considerate Approach (CA): Encompasses the interaction between the veterinary team and the patient and the inputs from the environment when veterinary care is being administered. Environmental inputs include:

- those from the patient
- the physical environment (including reception, exam room, and/or treatment areas)
- the client
- the veterinary team

Gentle Control (GC): How the veterinary team comfortably and safely positions the patient to allow the administration of veterinary care.



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Another excellent terminology technique to discuss with clients and one you can encourage them to start using immediately as their first line of reducing stress at home is **Touch Gradient (TG)**. We use TG during our physical portion of handling our canine and feline patients to help minimize Fear, Anxiety and Stress (FAS) during veterinary procedures.

Touch Gradient (TG) has two components: First, initiating hands on physical contact with a patient and then administering treatments that involve contact with the body such as an injection, nail trim, etc. without losing physical contact. The goal of TG is to maintain continual physical hands on contact throughout the entire procedure or examination whenever possible (with at least one hand). Explain to the client that sporadically touching our patients can result in a startle response which may lead to FAS. TG includes acclimating a patient to an increasing level of touch intensity associated with veterinary procedures, while continuously measuring the patient's acceptance and comfort – tapping the toe with a toenail clipper, lifting the paw or ear flap, etc. Clients can do the same at home by practicing touching a pet's toes, tail, ears, etc. or to help the pet get used to touch if those are stress point areas. This helps the client get involved and feel a part of the corrective process. When progress is made, laud it, even if small, at each visit, it's a win-win for everyone.

What's involved in getting the team on board?

Individual Certification: <https://fearfreepets.com/certification/>

Level 1

- Module 1: Fear Free Behavior Modification Basics
- Module 2: Fear Free Transport of Cats and Dogs to and from the Veterinary Hospital
- Module 3: Fear Free Reception and Waiting Area
- Module 4: Fear Free Exam Room
- Module 5: Fear Free In-Hospital Care
- Module 6: Fear Free Procedures
- Module 7a: Pre-visit Protocols: Complementary Therapeutics, Products & Pharmaceuticals
- Module 7b: In-Hospital Protocols: Sedation, Anesthesia, & Analgesia
- 9 hours of RACE approved CE

Module 8 – Implementation Guide:

- 3 hours of RACE approved CE
- Invaluable information to help implement Fear Free
- Three modules cover leadership, operations, human resources, strategic planning, metrics and marketing

Free Podcast Series – Several 1 hour RACE approved CE podcasts on a variety of topics that can be taken at any time

Level 2

- Module 1: Fear Free Patient Comfort & Well-Being
- Module 2: Fear Free – Learning & Conditioning
- Module 3: Fear Free In-Hospital Care
- Module 4: Fear Free Communications
- Module 5: Fear Free Marketing & Finance
- 7 hours of RACE approved CE

Level 3

- Module 1: Fear Free Core Concepts for the Veterinary Hospital
- Module 2: Fear Free in Action – Real Life Case Examples



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- Module 3: Preventing and Alleviating FAS through Education and Behavior Services
- Module 4: Feline and Canine Development and Enrichment
- Module 5: Problem Prevention & Behavior Solutions Model
- 6.5 hours of RACE approved CE

Practice Certification: <https://fearfreepets.com/about/fear-free-practice-certification/>

Practice must meet several standards:

- Physical and Emotional
- Client Education
- Medical Records
- Facility
- Community Education
- Culture, training, leadership
- Patient Observation
- **Application Criteria:**
 - 25% of staff must be individually certified including 50% +1 of your practice Full Time veterinarians
 - Implement Fear Free in practice
 - Download the certification standards and begin working toward fulfilling these as you work toward application. Fear Free team members will be available to ask as resources as you work on this pathway to prepare for your onsite clinical visit for certification.

5 Ways Veterinary Technicians Can Help Implement Fear FreeSM

<https://fearfreepets.com/5-ways-technicians-can-help-implement-fear-free/>



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Fear Free Glossary

CSR - Client care representative is the term used to describe veterinary team members whose primary job is to interface with the clients of our patients.

CA - Considerate approach is recognizing all the sensory and environmental inputs that a patient might experience and using this information to approach the patient in the calmest, least confrontational way possible.

Distress occurs when an animal is unable to return to normal baseline state and the consequent physiologic changes if left unchanged can cause both emotional and physiological damage.

FAS is the abbreviation utilized in **Fear FreeSM** for fear, anxiety and stress

Fear FreeSM is the implementation of techniques to address the emotional well-being of the veterinary health care team, the patients we treat and the people who love them while safely administering veterinary care.

GC - Gentle control is how the veterinary team comfortably and safely positions the patient to allow the administration of veterinary care without causing undue Fear, Anxiety and Stress

Learned helplessness is a state of emotional and behavioral depression that occurs when an animal perceives it has no control over the outcome of what they perceive as an aversive event. In some patients this can be mistaken for compliance, however upon examination of body postures, facial expressions and overall affect this may not be the case.

PVP = Pre-Visit Pharmacologic or medications prescribed to be given by the client to the pet prior to the patient's trip to the hospital to help start the calming features prior to arrival at the hospital. These are reserved for only the upper levels of FAS patients (levels 4 & 5).

Stress is caused by stressors; events that disrupt the body's normal function and are not necessarily maladaptive if you quickly return to a normal baseline state

TG - Touch gradient has two components: initiating and maintaining hands on physical contact with a patient, and administering treatments that involve contact with the body such as injections, nail trimming beginning with the less invasive touch as you acclimate the patient to be ready for the final administration of care.

VHCT -Veterinary Health Care Team refers to all members of the veterinary hospital that interface with clients and patients and includes veterinarians, front office staff (CCR), veterinary technicians, animal handlers and kennel personnel



Directions: Make a list of stimuli that the pet or client may see, hear, smell, taste, or feel in your hospital/facility. Visually transport yourself from the parking lot to the housing/kennel area. Group the stimuli in categories of potentially pleasant and potentially unpleasant.

Sights

- Pleasant

- Unpleasant

Sounds

- Pleasant

- Unpleasant

Smells

- Pleasant

- Unpleasant

Taste

- Pleasant

- Unpleasant

Touch

- Pleasant

- Unpleasant



What changes will you implement?

Make a list of Fear FreeSM changes you will implement at your hospital/facility in the next 1-4 weeks.

Pre-visit	
Lobby	
Scale	
Exam Room	
Treatment	
Housing	



Key Points:

- The sensory perception of dogs and cats is different than a human's perception. They can be more sensitive to environmental stimuli than we are.
- "Considerate approach encompasses the interaction between the veterinary team and the patients and inputs from the environment while veterinary care is being administered." *From the Fear Free Certification Program*
- "Gentle control is how the veterinary team comfortably and safely positions the patient to allow the administration of veterinary care." *From the Fear Free Certification Program*
- "The goal of considerate approach and gentle control is to alleviate fear, anxiety, and stress (FAS) in your patients." *From the Fear Free Certification Program*
- There is no "one way" to make a visit a Fear Free experience. Individual animals and clients will have individual preferences.
- Pre-visit tips for a wellness visit might include:
 - Acclimating and training the pet for transport
 - Providing non-slip surfaces during transport
 - Utilizing aroma and acoustic therapy
 - Bringing a hungry pet
 - Bringing familiar objects from home
 - Instructing the client to call the front office when they arrive in the parking lot
 - Nutraceuticals/Pharmaceuticals prescribed by the veterinarian
- Reception area tips for a wellness visit might include:
 - Providing non-slip surfaces and aroma and acoustic therapy
 - Using natural or incandescent lighting
 - Implementing a concierge approach
 - Utilizing barriers and avoiding seating at the entrance and exit paths
 - Utilizing a variety of high value treats
- Examination room tips for a wellness visit might include:
 - Designating feline only and canine only exam rooms
 - Providing non-slip surfaces and aroma and acoustic therapy
 - Using natural or incandescent lighting
 - Asking the owners their preferences
 - Allowing the pet to explore the room
 - Bringing the procedure to the pet whenever possible
 - Utilizing a variety of reinforcers (treats and toys)
 - Utilizing Gentle Control and a Considerate Approach
- If it is necessary to take the pet to the treatment area,
 - Reconnaissance your route without the pet
 - Inform other team members of your intent
 - Prepare for the procedure before bringing the pet to the area
 - Avoid or minimize potentially frightening stimuli
 - Utilize barriers during transport



- Tips for making the housing/kennel area Fear Free:
 - Utilize barriers
 - Consider appropriate placement for individual patients
 - Close kennel doors gently
 - Provide hiding spots
 - Provide non-slip surfaces and aroma and acoustic therapy
 - Whenever possible, use a considerate approach when removing the pet from a cage or kennel
- In regards to human-animal communication, a considerate approach involves:
 - Turning sideways
 - Avoiding direct eye contact
 - Moving smoothly and calmly
 - Allowing the pet to approach
 - Using treats
 - Avoiding aversive scents/using calming ones
 - Talking slowly and softly
- With Fear Free techniques it is best to be proactive and try to prevent fear from developing in the first place. The goal of each wellness visit is for the pet and client to have a positive and fun experience, rather than a neutral or negative experience.
- Prevention is easier than treatment!

Resources:

For more information on the Fear Free certification program and resources visit:

www.fearfreepets.com

Medication options for fear and anxiety in the veterinary hospital. Written by Karen Overall.

<http://veterinarynews.dvm360.com/medications-fearful-dogs-and-cats>

Low Stress Handling Algorithm by Dr. Colleen Koch

<http://veterinarymedicine.dvm360.com/low-stress-handling-algorithm-key-happier-visits-and-healthier-pets>

Please feel free to contact me, Debbie Martin, with any questions regarding this handout.

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The sensory perception of dogs and cats is different than a human’s perception. They can be more sensitive to environmental stimuli than we are. We must take this into consideration as we cultivate our hospital atmosphere and culture.

Below is a list of potential items, tools, and concepts that may be used to help create a Fear FreeSM veterinary hospital experience. Because pets have individual preferences, it is imperative to continually assess the patient’s response. What may be calming for one patient, may be stress inducing for another.

Focus on creating a veterinary “spaw” that caters to developing a calm and inviting environment for each individual client and patient.

POSSIBLE TOOLS

Variety of treats—Because of individual preferences and potential dietary restrictions, a variety of easily accessible treats should be available throughout the hospital. When medically indicated, patients should be provided with small and highly desired treats throughout the veterinary experience to help condition a positive emotional response with the veterinary hospital. Examples of possible treats include:

- *Commercially available pea size or smaller canine and feline treats in a variety of textures:* crunchy, soft and chewy, squishable, and lickable. Semi-moist pet foods or rolls may also be considered.
- *Freeze-dried treats (turkey, salmon, cheese, etc.).* There are commercially available options.
- *Canned dog/cat food*—quick tip to reduce waste: divide a can of food into one tablespoon aliquots and place one aliquot in a 1 oz paper cup or empty 12 cc syringe casing, label a storage container or bag with the type of food contained (especially useful with hypoallergenic diets), store in the freezer. Pull out as needed throughout the day. They can be allowed to thaw at room temperature or warmed in your hands or a warm water bath before providing to the patient.
- *Pretzel rods:* lickable food (canned dog food, peanut butter, canned cheese, liver paste, etc.) can be placed on a pretzel rod and provided to the patient. Advantages: Keeps human fingers away from the mouth, and safer than a tongue depressor that may be grabbed and eaten by a dog.
- *Other human food options:* deli meat, cubed chicken or ham, canned cheese, cottage cheese, peanut butter (caution in regards to peanut allergies—always inquire about any human peanut allergies prior to using with a patient), string cheese, meat based canned baby food with no onions.

Towels—Pastel-colored plush, large towels can be used for comfort, visual blocks, gentle control, hiding, and safety. See color choices for more information regarding color options.

Toys—Play can provide for a fun outlet for our patients and help them to relax in the veterinary setting. Toys should be able to be disinfected after each patient.



Cat toys—Wand-type toys, food puzzle toys, plush toys, and cat nip (pending the cat’s response).

Dog toys—Appropriate-sized balls, fleece squeaky toys, food storage toys, tug toys.

Treat bags—All team members should have these so treats are easily accessible. The treat bag should be worn around the waist for ease of access.

Basket muzzles—When extra safety is needed with a patient, consider utilizing a basket muzzle with canine patients, as basket muzzles allow the pet to pant and take treats. When needed, muzzles should be used only to improve safety while implementing gentle control techniques. Consideration for the patient’s physiological and psychological well-being should be continually monitored. Teaching the pet to eagerly accept the muzzle through training is key to decreasing fear, anxiety, and stress.

Body wraps—Body wraps may have a calming effect on some patients. For best results, body wraps should be conditioned at home prior to use in the hospital.

Brushes and combs—Some pets enjoy being brushed. For a pet that is not relaxed enough to eat treats but enjoys being brushed, brushing can be used to help create a pleasant experience.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES

Non-slip surface options should be made available in all areas of the hospital in which patients have access. Examples include: exam and treatment tables, exam and treatment room floors, reception area, kennels/cages, radiograph table, bathing area, scales, etc.

Acoustic and/or music therapy can set the tone of the visit. A neutral white noise machine can be used to muffle other hospital sounds. Music designed to induce calmness and relaxation in cats and dogs can be used throughout the hospital to facilitate relaxation and dilute potentially unpleasant sounds associated with the hospital.

Incandescent lighting and/or natural lighting provides for a more home-like feel.

Calming pheromones can be used on towels, bedding, scrubs, or as a diffuser in all rooms within the hospital. When utilizing a pheromone spray on towels, bedding, or scrubs, it is recommended to wait a minimum of 10 minutes prior to the pet having exposure to the surface.

Lavender aromatherapy is useful for both clients and pets. Although current studies do not show strong support for the efficacy of aromatherapy due to inconsistencies in methodology and findings, evidence does indicate various odors have a significant effect on mood, cognition, physiology, and behavior. Additional studies are needed.^{1,2}

1. Herz, Rachel S. 2009. "Aromatherapy Facts And Fictions: A Scientific Analysis Of Olfactory Effects On Mood, Physiology And Behavior". *International Journal Of Neuroscience* 119 (2): 263-290. doi:10.1080/00207450802333953.



2. Koulivand, Peir Hossein, Maryam Khaleghi Ghadiri, and Ali Gorji. 2013. "Lavender And The Nervous System". Evidence-Based Complementary And Alternative Medicine 2013: 1-10. doi:10.1155/2013/681304.

Visual barriers are helpful to minimize sight lines between patients. Seeing other patients or even unfamiliar people can be stressful for some patients. Examples of visual barriers include plants, brochure stand, the strategic placement of towels and utilizing tables or other natural barriers while moving patients through the hospital.

Color choices—are essential to creating a low-stress environment, according to Heather Lewis, AIA, NCARB, of Animal Arts in Boulder, Colorado. Generally, the colors used in the veterinary hospital should employ hues in the soft yellow to violet range, avoiding oranges and reds. Pastel yellow and violet. This applies to towels, scrubs, doctor’s coats, wall color, and bedding. Based on the fact that dogs and cats are able to perceive the ultraviolet UVB spectrum, white manmade items may fluoresce. Consequently, white should be avoided.

Water bowls are necessary to have in rooms if medically appropriate for the patient. Patients can become thirsty due to travel, panting, and/or eating treats. Help some of your patients relax by having a fresh water bowl in the room for them. Bowls should be disinfected after each patient.

Litterbox in feline examination rooms should be present when medically appropriate. Most cats are not trained to eliminate on cue or at specific times. Thus, a cat may not have had an opportunity to eliminate prior to the trip to the hospital. A full bladder or colon can lead to increased irritability and restlessness. Litterboxes should be disinfected with a gentle cleaner after each patient.

Hiding spots in cages, when medically prudent allow the patient to choose whether to be visualized or hidden.

PROCEDURAL/ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGES

Proactive anti-anxiety nutraceuticals and/or medications as well as pain medication as warranted and dispensed by the veterinarian. For patients that are easily stressed or procedures that have the potential to be slightly uncomfortable or stress inducing, start proactively treating patients when medically appropriate to create the best possible experience.

Fresh needle for injections. To make for a smooth insertion into the skin.

Low volume and low frequency treatment options when medically possible. When considering treatment options, factor in dosing frequency and volume. Often times a smaller volume or less frequent dosing/treatment will be more easily accepted by our canine and feline patients. Discuss options with clients.

Topical anesthetics can be used to numb an area prior to injection or procedures, if medically appropriate. Options and examples include lidocaine gels or ice prior to giving an injection or placing an IV catheter.



Think “Spaw”: Fear Free Hospital Supply List

Cleaners—effective cleaning agents that remove scents, not just mask them. The cleaners should have a minimized odor themselves. Pets’ sense of smell is much stronger than ours.

Emotional record system—Each hospital should develop a record keeping system to record information regarding individual patient and client preferences. This prevents the need to rediscover these preferences with each visit. Similarly, information regarding the current stress level of the patient should be communicated to team members throughout each visit.

A Hospital Culture dedicated to recognizing and preventing fear, anxiety, and stress in our patients. A Fear Free hospital culture involves all veterinary team members consistently incorporating a Considerate Approach, Gentle Control, and a touch gradient with every patient.

DEFINITIONS

Considerate approach is recognizing all the sensory and environmental inputs that a patient might experience and using this information to approach the patient in the calmest, least confrontational way possible.

Gentle control is how the veterinary team comfortably and safely positions the patient to allow the administration of veterinary care without causing undue Fear, Anxiety, and Stress

Touch gradient has two components: initiating and maintaining hands on physical contact with a patient, and administering treatments that involve contact with the body such as injections, nail trimming beginning with the least invasive touch as you acclimate the patient to be ready for the final administration of care.

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