



Trainer and Behavior Consultant Mikkel Becker on Working Closely with Your Veterinarian, Cooperative Care Games, and Why She Is Optimistic for the Dog Industry



Mikkel Becker spends some time with her dapper dog Indiana Bones.

► What do you feel dog owners don't know about working with veterinarians?

The pet's veterinarian and veterinary team can be critical in their work of overseeing and treating areas of concern that directly contribute to the emotional, psychological, and behavioral health of the dog, as physical and emotional health are inextricably linked.

Beyond the pet's own family, the pet's veterinarian is the dog's ultimate total health advocate, with an ability to see beyond the surface to what might be going on underneath and contributing to outward behavior changes or concerns the pet parent may be seeing. It's my firm belief that for a dog to be properly treated for a behavioral issue, it's essential that their care is continually overseen by a trusted vet, as physical health directly impacts emotional health, and vice versa.

Many, many issues—including anxiety, reactivity, or aggression—are linked to underlying health problems, such as chronic pain, that either directly caused or exacerbated the issue in the first place. It's also essential to note that there are veterinary specialists, including those with advanced training in behavior, who have the added ability to guide pet guardians in nutraceutical and pharmaceutical choices that can complement the training, management, and behavior modification changes they're employing. Pharmaceutical and nutraceutical help by no means provides a magic cure-all, but instead, for pets in need who may suffer from conditions that can include compromised serotonin levels in the brain, it can help create a better headspace in which they can better learn and retain the different behaviors and improved emotional states their guardian wants to impart.

Dogs, just like people, have very complex mental and emotional lives, with cognitive and psychological conditions that in many ways resemble those of humans. Just like us, when they're overly panicked and stressed out, it's nearly



Veterinary specialists, especially those with behavioral backgrounds, might be able to provide your dog with medications that even out possible hormone imbalances to help your dog truly benefit from training.

impossible to capture and hold their attention on the things we want them to focus on. Instead, the dog will probably be responding from a survival-based fight-or-flight response. They're not in a rational thinking mode, but instead are in life-or-death autopilot mode—simply seeking to survive. In such a panicked state, it can be difficult for dogs to receive and enjoy the reward we're pairing with the less pleasant event. And, while elements can be adjusted to make things less aversive and overwhelming for the dog, in some cases it's simply too much for the dog or owner. From a welfare standpoint, it's a kindness to our dogs to help them to feel better emotionally and mentally so they can receive and fully enjoy the type of happy, feel-good rewards and experiences we want to impart. Their ability to enjoy positives will help them more readily retain these new behaviors.

We do dogs a disservice when we neglect to provide veterinary intervention and continued oversight into the emotional and behavioral health of dogs, because in many cases there are underlying issues that may be causing or contributing to the problem itself. Further, there are oftentimes different nutraceuticals or pharmaceuticals that can complement and further build upon the ability to directly intervene and help the dog feel and think in different ways.

It's important to remember that for many pet guardians their dog may feel "unreachable" primarily because their dog goes into that tailspin survival mode easily and has a hard

time coping with and recovering from a stressful event. For these dogs, nutraceutical and pharmaceutical medications can make the difference in helping the dog to be more receptive and ready to learn. These additions can help to reduce the speed and intensity with which the animal's brain and body move into stress-based survival responses and can help the dog to recover faster from a stressful event. In addition, when the dog feels good emotionally, they're better able to use the rational, higher-functioning parts of the brain. This allows for voluntary, conscious choice, rather than their body flying uncontrolled into autopilot-like survival responses.

Such veterinary-guided intervention pairs well with reward-based training and behavior modification plans implemented directly by the trainer partners and pet guardians; meaning there's an entire team available to note and address problems of concern; tackling these issues from the inside out.

► **What are the top three skills you advise owners to work on with their dogs before they go to a veterinary or training appointment?**

Treatment station training is important. This offers a clear green light signal to the pet's guardian and subsequent handlers that the dog is comfortable and ready to proceed with the interaction, handling, or care task. If the dog starts to lean away or move out of their stationary position on the treatment station this is a clear "red light" to stop the interaction or handling task. Unlike mat training, in which the dog generally reclines in a settled position and is left alone while in the space, treatment station training guides a dog onto a nonslip area where they become accustomed to being interacted with in a positive way. Rather than a resting position, the dog remains in a standing position unless cued otherwise to allow easy access to different parts of the body for the handling and exam. Since slip and scare moments on slick floors in veterinary hospitals are common, the treatment station also offers a more secure place for the dog to stand for their exam and care (much of which may take place where the dog is most comfortable, such as on the floor or bench). In addition, the treatment station also offers an easy way to get the dog onto the scale—you can

place their nonslip space indicator on the scale, the weight of which can be zeroed out before the dog is encouraged to step on top.



Teach your dog hand targeting as a way to allow your dog to approach on his own terms. It's a good tool for guiding him to specific spots in the veterinarian's office, too!

Touch/hand targeting is helpful for care as it allows the dog a go-to way to say hi and approach staff at a pace they're comfortable with. This is helpful for allowing the initial touch to occur on the dog's terms, rather than having hands immediately reaching toward the dog. Allowing the dog to complete the approach and rewarding their efforts starts off the interaction on a more positive note. In addition, hand targeting can also be used to move the dog from place to place, such as onto the scale.

Lastly, a lot of angst for dogs comes from the unknown and unpredictable. As such, I really like to give dogs a heads-up on what's going to happen before it takes place. For this reason, I'm a big fan of communication cues (also called predictor cues). These are ideally imparted in a positive manner by starting slowly on neutral body parts with people the dog is most comfortable with (this would include immediate family members petting the dog on comfortable places, like their chest, shoulder, or under the neck). Then, as the dog remains relaxed, communication cues can be transitioned to occur with touching other parts

of the body and with less familiar people; continuing to pair the process with ample positives to make it a feel-good experience for the dog and a happily anticipated event. Say the word first, such as a general "pet" cue to indicate the dog will be touched, then the familiar person pets the dog in a comfortable place on the body, followed by a tasty treat reward. This not only reduces the angst of uncertainty about what's going to occur by giving the dog a proper heads-up before handling occurs at places like the vet, but also imparts a form of reassurance, as it's been made into an event the dog is already comfortable with. And, if the dog is stressed and uncomfortable with the interaction or intent of touch, the communication cue provides the dog with the ability to move away and signal their distress before the interaction or handling progresses, reducing the risk of the dog responding defensively.

Then, if I had my wish, I'd strongly encourage pet parents to teach their pooches a chin rest on an inanimate object, like a stool with a rolled towel or Snuggle Puppy® placed on top. This further allows the dog to have a clear way of signaling their guardians and other handlers, like the veterinary team, as to whether they're comfortable and ready to proceed. The people can then do so safely at the pace the dog is comfortable with, allowing for pauses or stopping points if the dog needs a break or if elements of the situation need to be adjusted for the dog to feel more comfortable with what's taking place.

► **What are some of the top benefits for dogs seen by Certified Fear Free Professionals?**

Dogs are continually learning, whether it's in a training session or during regular, everyday interactions. One of the places of particular importance for the dog in terms of their learning experience is what they encounter at places of care like the vet. These experiences can make or break the dog's trust and happy responsiveness to different people, places, and types of touch. As such, it's important to work with professionals who are trained and committed to overseeing and protecting the emotional well-being of your dog at the same time they're providing physical care.



Fear Free veterinarians keep emotional medical records for your dog that include notes on their stressors, any sensitive body parts, and how staff can best keep your dog feeling comfortable, happy, and safe.

Fear Free Professionals have extensive training and continuing education requirements that educationally and practically guide the veterinary provider in ways to better approach, interact with, handle, and treat pets during different aspects of their care. Rather than forging through the fear and getting care done regardless, Fear Free professionals make it a priority to watch over both physical and emotional health as one whole. In some cases, this means making the choice to stop and try a different approach or even come back at another time rather than risking a negative experience that can't be taken back. For those situations where veterinary care is urgent, such as in emergency veterinary hospitals, steps are taken to substantially reduce the emotional distress or physical discomfort the animal feels; all while providing creature comforts that can soothe, positively distract, and calmly reassure the dog to reduce the negatives and up the positives of the experience.

Just as veterinarians keep a medical record on pets, Fear Free providers also keep an emotional medical record on the pet with specific information that includes specific stressors for the pet, such as sensitive areas of the body or a particular dislike of certain places or procedures, as

well as directly indicating ways the team can help the animal to feel most comfortable, happy, and safe (including favorite ways to be approached or touched, known tricks, favorite treats, and preferred toys). The goal and benefit of a Fear Free approach is reducing the risk of the animal enduring a stressful handling or treatment experience that can have long-lasting or lifelong repercussions. Instead, the Fear Free team is all about preventing and reducing fear, anxiety, and stress and about imparting positive emotional experiences that can boost the pet's emotional experience and enjoyment of visiting the vet to make it an overall less distressing and more pleasant event; meaning the pet is more likely to receive timely, thorough, quality veterinary treatment and care that's less stressful and safer for the pet, their guardians, and the entire veterinary team.

Stress is the top reason pets aren't taken into the vet as often as recommended (the stress to the pet being the top concern and stress to the pet parent just thinking about having to take their pet in being the third-highest concern). As such, Fear Free directly addresses the barrier stress creates to dogs receiving timely, quality medical care by making it a less stressful, more pleasant experience that's enjoyed by both pooches and their people. Just like the treat that being extra spoiled with special goodies and star treatment when visiting a favorite grandma's house can be for a child, so too does the veterinary team do their part in trying to make the veterinary hospital a Disneyland of sorts that has all the magic and feel-good fun of extra tasty treats and positive encounters (ideally resulting in an animal who is reluctant to leave and ready to come back again). And, when certain invasive or unpleasant elements need to be done, the Fear Free team takes a guided, practical approach for ensuring it's as minimally aversive as possible, while providing ample means of comfort to help the animal feel secure. When the animal is less stressed, their quality of care is also improved—not only can a more thorough exam or treatment be achieved, but the animal is more likely to act like their normal selves and will more accurately display issues of concern, like a change in gait, that otherwise may be masked by stress-fueled adrenaline.

► **What are your favorite cooperative care games and training tools?**

- Muzzle training (ideally with a basket muzzle)—see www.fearfreepets.com/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2016/1/Keep-Calm-and-Muzzle-On-1.pdf
- Treatment stations—see www.maddiesfund.org/treatment-station-training-for-care.htm
- Chin rest
- The bucket game

► **Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the way dogs are currently being handled by both trainers and veterinarians? Why?**

I'm extremely optimistic, because I believe the affection people have for their dogs resembles that which is felt for human children (dogs both intellectually and emotionally are indeed similar to human toddlers), and the growing science-based applications of behavior and behavior modification methods together with this affection are increasing the need and value of more humane, human-like treatment for pets. Such love and increased understanding of the psychological and emotional capacity of our dogs both demands and directs for more ethical and humane methods that will protect and uphold the well-being of the pet throughout interactions, whether in their training or during medical or grooming care.

Dog training and behavior concepts are no longer being based on a pseudoscience of myths and misconceptions that at one time justified using unnecessarily harsh and even abusive methods. Instead, such outdated and scientifically unsound methods are being steadily overtaken by approaches that understand the complex physical, mental, and emotional lives of pets and advocate for the enhanced well-being of the pet. Reward-based methods are imperative for helping the dog to not only act better on the outside, but to also feel better emotionally and be in a better headspace on the inside. This all extends outward into increased coping skills, an improved skillset, and happy motivation to behave better in the future. In other words, humane, reward-based training methods provide a stronger foundation for dogs to

begin with and offers a deeper healing and longer lasting resolution when issues already exist.

As such, dogs are getting higher quality care that addresses the root causes for their reactions, such as fear, anxiety, and stress or physical discomfort and pain. For training to be successful and safe, it's important for the underlying issues that might be causing the outward "bad behaviors" to be addressed, rather than merely masking the root issue and temporarily treating only outward symptoms.

Common examples of coercive methods that are used to address behavior issues include verbal reprimands, physical corrections, and force that can include corrective collars, jerks on the leash, forcing the dog into compromised positions against their will, and otherwise physically or socially intimidating and forcing the dog to "behave" using confrontational techniques. Such methods are dangerous, as the long-term likelihood is that they'll have to be increased over time to maintain effectiveness.

Aggressive responses from the person increases the likelihood of aggression from the dog. Worse yet, because such punitive training serves to treat only the outward extensions of the dog's inward negative emotional state,



Mikkel Becker's dog, Indiana Bones, demonstrates the calm results of modern canine care programs like Fear Free.

such punishment impedes the dog's ability to effectively communicate with people and other dogs. It limits the dog's ability to warn others effectively and safely, through growling, barking, etc., that they're feeling uncomfortable and unsafe. As such, many dogs treated in such a way are faster to react and more limited when it comes to avoiding physical confrontation. With fewer tools in their toolbelt, the dog is pushed to a state in which they're faster to physically fight. One sign of healing in dogs who have experienced punitive training is when they once again expand their communication to include warnings that allow the dog to express their feelings about the situation and seek the safety and space needed (without having to physically fight and defend themselves to do so).

Failure to meet the dog's real needs and inner motivation will result in frustration and likely failure at resolving the issue (at best), and far too often will result in a compromise of trust, a break in the human-animal bond, and an increased risk of the dog being surrendered or even euthanized. By treating the root cause, the Fear Free approach works with, rather than against, the dog. Punitive and intimidation-based methods almost treat dogs as adversaries who need to be controlled, rather than the deeply emotional and intelligent creatures they are.

Dogs, like children, need and deserve to be treated with ethical respect and a kind, scientifically sound approach. More and more pet owners are being educated by trainers, veterinary staff, and quality educational materials on how to better understand their dog's behavior, body language, and species-specific needs. As such, pet parents now have more information to back up why certain approaches to training and pet care "feel" wrong. They now have the evidence-based understanding to recognize signs of emotional distress in their pet's body language, and know the better training methods, like clicker training, that can teach their pet to behave without harmful physical force. Thankfully, there are now way more effective ways to train pets—training never has to hurt or be scary for the dog to learn. The most effective, long-lasting, and physically and emotionally safe methods are based on a whole-pet approach that attempts

to treat the entire pet (including both their physical and emotional health) and addresses the issue in a way that more closely resembles the methods employed for humans: allowing the animal to have a more direct voice and choice in their care and how it's provided.

As a trainer and as the daughter of a veterinarian, I've directly felt the strained relations in times past between veterinary professionals and training or behavior experts. However, with the emergence of Fear Free and other educational outreach programs that tie trainers and behavior consultants together with veterinary teams, I'm seeing a more partnered approach that works for the good of the pet. This teamwork-based, collaborative approach between trainers and behavior professionals and the pet's veterinary team is for the betterment of the pet, as they're able to receive more effective, well-rounded care that ensures good health from the inside out.

These efforts also increase the understanding of preventive methods as well, demonstrating that socialization efforts and early reward-based training guidance can help proactively guide the pet toward more desirable behavior from the very start. Yes, there are still veterinary professionals who use outdated methods and have a shallow understanding of behavior and training methods, but they are becoming fewer and far between as educational programs like Fear Free offer scientifically sound knowledge and practical guidance for how to treat the entire pet kindly and humanely, including physical health, but also emotional and behavioral health.

Education about animal learning and behavior is becoming a greater part of the standard curriculum for veterinary students. For instance, many veterinary colleges encourage, and some even require, Fear Free Certification for their veterinary students (Fear Free Certification is complimentary for all DVM students and veterinary nurse students). As such, veterinary professionals are now learning emotionally protective methods for handling, interacting with, and guiding animal behavior from the very start of their professional careers, where in decades past there may have been very little, if any, talk about emotional health and behavior.

Because Fear Free Certified Professionals are required to take ongoing Fear Free continuing education, it also means that those who earn Fear Free Certification are kept up to date on emotionally protective practices and other behaviorally friendly methods of providing quality care for pets. Such ongoing training includes educational materials for better partnering with training and behavior professionals, guiding pet parents toward using more effective preventive and management-based strategies, offering enrichment programs in-home and in-hospital to improve animal welfare, and advocating reward-based training. These programs help veterinary providers to be on the same page with humane trainers and behavior professionals to both refer dogs more appropriately to them and to partner directly with these professionals in a more collaborative and cohesive way to offer optimal protection for pets.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, many veterinary professionals have had negative experiences with trainers and behavior professionals, as the industry in the past was like the wild west in terms of what the veterinarian could expect when referring out or working with such professionals. Working with unfit trainers or untrained “behavior experts” not only puts the veterinarian’s credibility on the line, but also does a disservice to dogs, since certain training and behavior modification methods can be extremely detrimental and dangerous.

Thankfully, this, too, is progressively changing as more and more training and animal behavior organizations are offering high-quality education that’s rooted in humane, reward-based approaches. These organizations are creating higher standards of care and expanded knowledge and experience requirements for those calling themselves trainers or behavior consultants. Increased availability and advocacy for certifications, the establishment of higher-level animal training education programs (like the Karen Pryor Academy, The Academy for Dog Trainers, and the Victoria Stilwell Academy), and an increasing dedication to



Fear Free certifications help create a network of professionals with known skill—veterinarians and trainers can feel confident about recommending one another.

humane, reward-based methods and partnership with the pet’s vet (such as the Fear Free Animal Trainer Certification) are increasing the veterinary professional’s trust and close working relationship with training and behavior professionals.

In the past, it was much more difficult for veterinary professionals to know who they were referring clients to, but the industry has changed and there is now an increasing and ongoing commitment for professionals to maintain a baseline level of education and certification, to commit to ongoing education, and to seek certification through educational institutions that have more established standards for their members. In addition, trainers and behavior consultants are increasingly able to receive educational guidance that advocates for a close working relationship with veterinarians to build more effective collaboration that ensures the animal is both physically and behaviorally healthy. As such, it’s becoming more and more standard for veterinary providers to have a trusted referral base of trainers and behavior experts that clients can be directed toward. And, when issues exist, they are more often addressed and resolved in a partnered, collaborative, and cohesive way that is more protective of and effective for the pet.