

Colorado State University Veterinarians Offer Tips for Helping Pets through Trauma, Disasters

Trauma affects animals much as it does people, say veterinarians at Colorado State University's Veterinary Teaching Hospital, who offer tips on the importance of routines, including play time and meals, and such therapies as pet message.

What to watch for:

Some of the signs of a stressed or anxious pet include:

- The pet's unwillingness to leave the owner.
- Lack of desire to eat or lack of usual focus, often attributed to disobedience when it may be anxiety.
- Pacing, circling or other repetitive behaviors. Stereotypic behaviors can increase or develop in times of stress.
- Excessive panting, hair loss and dilated pupils.
- Increased licking or self grooming, which can lead to self-injury.
- Increased startle behaviors. When they startle at sounds or sudden changes, this tells you they are more on edge than usual.
- Hiding behaviors displayed in cats in particular, which can sometimes lead to inappropriate elimination.

How to help:

- Calm yourself first. Recognizing what's happening to you can help you calm down and also help your pet, particularly animals that are very bonded to their owners.
- Develop and maintain as much of a routine as you can. That includes feeding, walking and play time. Routines, even when you and your animals are displaced, can have a calming effect.
- Continue normal behaviors. If your dog or cat is trained to offer certain behaviors (sitting before accepting a treat, for example), continue those routines because animals expect them.
- Realize the power of massage. Scientists have proven that petting a dog or cat can decrease human blood pressure, but petting with purpose can also help calm animals. Try slow strokes with mild to moderate pressure, but stop or try another region if the pet dislikes the touch. Many animals appreciate some gentle kneading to the neck and shoulders if stress has built up there.
- Consider using natural approaches to relieve stress. Lavender aromatherapy, provided as easily as applying a few drops of pure essential oil to a tissue near the animal, calms both

pets and people. Classical music with a slow tempo, one or two instruments, and relaxing melodies can also relieve anxiety. Commercial products such as Feliway and DAP – or even CDs that mimic the heartbeat of mom when the pup is in the womb - have calming effects that only the animals will notice. Try to reduce unneeded noise and light stimulation during rest times. The more quiet and peaceful the room where pets sleep and eat, the happier they will be. Deep, restful sleep is not only rejuvenating, it also reduces pain and allows the body and mind to recover from stress.

- Practice relaxation. Encourage your pet to sit in front of you and maintain eye contact. Use a stay cue if they know one. Feed them treats every few seconds at first for sitting still and focusing on you. This is harder for stressed pets, but when they are eating and breathing deeply, their stress level will start to come down. Increase the amount of time between treats given to encourage the pet to stay relaxed longer. This simple exercise of being still can relieve anxiety for both pets and people. Breathe deeply along with your pet - sometimes they pattern their breathing on you!
- Change how pets feel about particular stressors. When pets are under stress they often react with barking, vocalization or even aggression. These behaviors can all be manifestations of fear. Depending on the stimulus that prompts these episodes of reactivity, work with them at a distance so that they notice the problem situation but can keep in control. Feed them a treat every time they experience that environmental cue. Think of it as food for feeling better. With enough repetitions, the pet learns that a thing that predicted something scary for them now predicts a tasty treat. Pets then start to anticipate change more positively and this can dramatically reduce environmental stress.
- Exercise your pet. A tired pet is a happy pet. As for people, exercise calms pets and helps them feel more relaxed. If you haven't been exercising your pet, now is a good time to start with short walks in the early morning or evening to avoid the hottest part of the day. Avoid times of day with heavy smoke in the air from wildfires.