

UNDERSTANDING, RECOGNISING, PREVENTING AND TREATING ANXIETY HOLISTICALLY IN PETS



Dr. Edward Bassingthwaite

Meet Dr Edward



Hi! I'm Dr. Edward Bassingthwaite ; the Healing Vet. As a registered veterinarian and holistic vet, my mission is to provide the best quality, most compassionate veterinary care possible.

Using a balance of conventional diagnostics, treatments and holistic care, I offer professional vet services with the same degree of love and kindness as you have for your own pets. After all, animal companions are part of our extended families, and we'd do anything for them!

Growing up on a cattle property in North Queensland, I spent most of my youth on horseback. I was drawn to natural horsemanship, and between competing with horses and working with cattle, I spent hundreds upon thousands of hours getting to know different animals around the land.

I took this love for living creatures to a professional level and in 1995, I graduated as a veterinarian. My preferred location for consults is at the home of my clients. Animals usually dislike visiting a vet hospital, as painful and scary things often happen to them there, and we can't tell them why. At home, I get to see happy and relaxed animals, which makes it much easier to work and communicate with them.

During my twenty-plus years of practice, I have developed a hands-on system of bodywork healing called Whole Energy Body Balance (WEBB). I have integrated this system into my regular vet practice, and believe it to be invaluable in helping with the wellbeing of animals.

I have a deep respect for holistic therapies, and will use the best of both complementary and conventional medicines in order to provide effective treatments. Animals deserve the same opportunities we afford ourselves, and as a health professional for all who are furry, feathery or scaly, it's my duty to offer this to them.

Understanding Anxiety in Pets

You need to understand a problem before you can fix it. This is especially true when we consider the all-too-common problem of anxiety in our beloved pets.

There are many kinds of anxiety that may affect our furry family members. Anxiety is more common in dogs, but it can affect cats too. The following list is primarily about anxiety in dogs. I'll talk about anxiety in cats a little later on.

Separation anxiety is anxiety triggered by your dog being separated from other beings they are bonded with. This can be humans, other pets, or other animals.

Sound sensitivity/phobias are an anxiety in response to sounds - the most common ones being thunder and fireworks - but just about any sound can be an anxiety trigger for some dogs.

Veterinary anxiety/phobias are an anxiety response to going to the vet. This may become severe if any veterinary interventions or treatments are required. Events like having to have surgery (even routine desexing) may be a trigger or worsen an existing issue acutely.

Generalised anxiety is hypervigilant, with constant exploration and alertness. The dog has no 'off switch'. They tend to trigger into high levels of arousal easily and quickly. These dogs are often unresponsive to training and commands and tend to be poorly behaved, jumping on people, things like that.



Reactive/aggressive anxiety is anxiety triggered by other animals, humans, or machines coming close to the pet. This can also be called social anxiety. It's often fear-based, and most reactive pets have significant (often undiagnosed) pain that is part of the driver of the behaviour. Barking, lunging, and biting are all possible when more severe. It's important to note that some aggression may be territorial or due to resource guarding, and thus not caused by anxiety.

Compulsive disorders such as fly biting, circling, tail chasing, bird chasing etc. are nearly always seen in dogs with underlying anxiety issues.

Empathic anxiety is anxiety caused by the dog's response to their guardian's anxiety. Pets are very sensitive to their humans' state of being and are profoundly impacted by stress or anxiety in anyone in the family unit. Here's some data from "Prevalence, comorbidity, and breed differences in canine anxiety in 13,700 Finnish pet dogs" a study by Milla Salonen, Sini Sulkama, Salla Mikkola, Jenni Puurunen, Emma Hakanen, Katriina Tiira, César Araujo & Hannes Lohi

"Based on the results here and in previous studies, noise sensitivity stands out as the most common canine anxiety with a prevalence of 32% in this study. Earlier, the prevalence has varied between 20% and 50%^{9,12,14,15,16,17,18}. Based on our study and previous studies^{14,17,18}, the most common noise sensitivity is the fear of fireworks. Fear was the second most common canine anxiety, with a prevalence of 29%. Specifically, 17% of dogs showed fear of other dogs, 15% fear of strangers and 11% fear of novel situations. Prevalence of total fearfulness^{12,16} and prevalence of fear subtraits^{9,15,16,35} were quite similar in previous studies as well. Fear of surfaces and heights appears to be highly prevalent in our study population, as 23.5% of dog owners reported that their dogs were highly fearful of different surfaces and heights.

"Based on our results, every fifth dog displays high levels of inattention and 15% high levels of hyperactivity/impulsivity. Excessive activity has been reported in 12% to 34% of dogs^{9,12}. Compulsive behaviour patterns were observed in 16% of the dogs, agreeing with a previous study⁹. Based on our results and previous studies^{9,28}, self-mutilation is the most common compulsive behaviour. Self-mutilation may be a compulsion, but it may also be caused by allergies, ectoparasites or other skin problems, possibly explaining the high prevalence of the substrate."

That's a hell of a lot of anxious dogs in the world. Hundreds of millions!

The Aetiology and Pathology of Anxiety in Pets



Let's define these technical, medical terms.

Aetiology: the cause, set of causes, or manner of causation of a disease or condition.

Pathology: the science of the causes and effects of diseases, pathological features considered collectively; the typical behaviour of a disease.

I want to help you understand the root cause of anxiety. We are talking here specifically about pets, but it's the same for all other animals, and for us humans too.

In essence, anxiety is a state of unhealthy arousal (activation of the Sympathetic Nervous System, fight/flight/fawn/freeze) which the pet cannot regulate themselves out of.

The antidote to anxiety is healthy relaxation (activation of the Parasympathetic Nervous System, rest/digest/regenerate).

You could describe anxiety as arousal with nowhere to go- but that's a bit simplistic.

The fight/flight response is triggered because of how your pet is thinking, and how they are feeling emotionally. Any time your pet is in a state of anxiety, they will be feeling fear, feeling unsafe, feeling threatened in some way.

Anxiety as a medical condition, at the root cause, is an inability to your dog to be able to relax. This is a body/mind problem. The body goes into a stress/arousal state of being, and at the same time, the mind is in a fearful state. The bad news is that these two nested layers of responses tend to feed on each other.

Anxiety tends to escalate, to get worse over time, especially if not treated. Every fearful experience reinforces the pet's memories of other times that they were fearful and anxious. They tend to become more and more sensitised to the core anxiety triggers, and then, because your pet is already freaking out, they tend to generalize their anxiety to more and more 'triggers'.

If you understand that your anxious pet is in acute mental and emotional discomfort, this will help you not get angry with them if their anxiety symptoms result in destruction, injury to other pets, and so on. Because getting angry is just about the worst thing you can do. It can only make things worse for your pet.

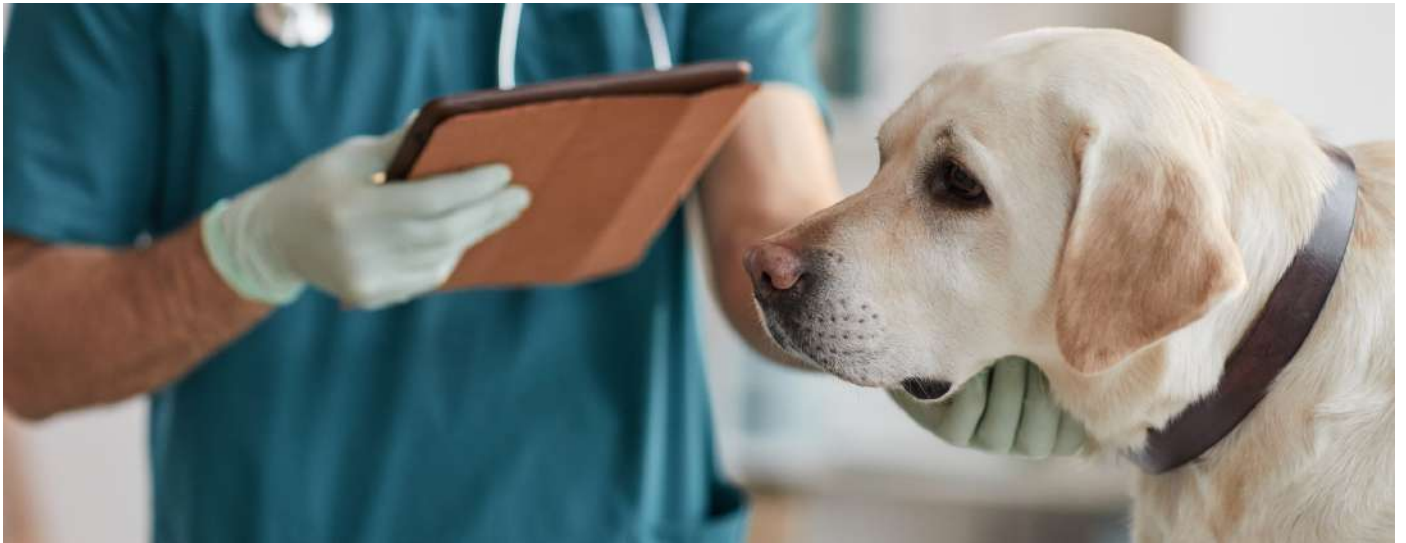
Anxiety will often become a chronic, low to medium grade level of unhealthy anxiety (arousal). These dogs will have a hair-trigger - they'll escalate into higher levels of arousal very quickly and easily! Their normal becomes arousal, instead of relaxation.

In contrast, a healthy, happy pet should spend 90-95% of their time in healthy relaxation. Calm, chilled, at ease. They would not go into high levels of arousal unless there's a good reason, a serious threat.

A life of relaxation, calm and ease is the end goal for your anxious pet. And with most pets, even if they have severe anxiety, this is achievable (if you're willing to put your time and energy into helping them).

To achieve this, you'll need to work on teaching your pets how to regulate from arousal into relaxation not only physically, but mentally and emotionally too.

Recognising Anxiety in Pets



You could think of your pet having a green zone of arousal (healthy relaxation), a yellow zone (Healthy play, exercise and fun, happy mind and emotions), an orange zone (unhealthy arousal - lower grade fight-flight with active fearful thoughts and emotions), and a red zone (full-blown fight/flight, conscious brain turned off, in total survival mode, unresponsive to communication from their humans, likely to harm themselves and others).

There is a whole range of signs that will change in your pet's behavior and body as they move through these zones.

If a pet has severe anxiety, the signs are easy to see. You'll see obvious changes in the animal's behavior and in their body, their physiology. Anxiety is the opposite of relaxation, the opposite of peace and calm.

It's important to know that early (subtle) signs of anxiety may be easily overlooked, even by devoted pet parents. And the earlier you see and start to act to help anxious pets, the better the outcomes will be when it comes to preventing and treating the problem!

The earliest signs may be only hesitation when meeting a new thing, or something that is uncomfortable. A reluctance to go on a walk, wanting to stop on walks. Simply being more restless than usual, and having trouble settling (self-soothing) coils are early signs. Any signs of active avoidance or startling at a stimulus may be important early signs.

Orange zone signs to look out for (from mild to more severe) are:

Hyperactive, always wanting to play, becoming easily over-excited, poor response to training, or 'forgetting' training when they do become aroused are other signs to be aware of.

A step up from this is full-blown hypervigilance, and perhaps moving into vocalising- barking at people or cars going past, then not being able to switch off after a stimulus or trigger. A lot of dogs that people think are 'just a bit wild' or 'super active' are actually either anxious or building up towards developing anxiety.

Any pet that is out of control, who gets over-excited when new people or pets visit, or when they are out in the pet park, is often actually anxious, over-aroused, and unable to move into healthy relaxation.

Other signs to be aware of are holding up one paw, lots of yawning, avoidance behavior (lots of sniffing is a classic), lip licking, whale eyes (showing whites of the eyes), panting, pacing, shaking/trembling, restlessness/fidgeting, out of control undesirable behaviour (jumping on people, mouthing etc.) or licking their body a lot.

Red zone signs!

As anxiety escalates, you may see vocalization (barking, howling), drooling, cowering, freezing, destructive behaviors, escaping, bolting, aggression, full-on fights, or even urinating and defecating all over the place.

Remember- the best time to act with any anxiety problem is at the very first sign of any anxiety at all!

Cats and anxiety (compared to dogs)



Anxiety, though it is less common in dogs, may still affect up to 50% of cats in one way or another. Probably the most common type of anxiety in cats is fear of people or other animals that they don't know- visitors, etc.

Symptoms of anxiety in cats include spraying or messing outside of the litter box, hiding, vocalising, clinginess, vomiting, trembling, becoming less active, trying to escape, pacing, changes in appetite, changes in sleeping patterns, and destructive or aggressive behaviour.

Overgrooming with loss of hair, and sometimes sores and scabs on the body, is a classic symptom of anxiety in cats - one that dogs do not display.

In multi-cat households, bullying by other cats can be an important cause of anxiety. It's important to have plenty of litter boxes and water bowls (number of cats +1) spread all around the house so that one cat can't block another cat's access by sitting in a doorway or thoroughfare. Noises, vet visits, travelling, being confined, age related cognitive dysfunction, traumatic events, injuries, pain or illness may also be causative factors in anxiety in cats.

You should give your pup 3 days to settle into their new home - then have a huge party, with 20, 30, 50 or more friends coming to visit, laugh, people with hoodies, hats, caps, beards, and different skin colours. This is a great way to help prevent anxiety.

Separation anxiety is not uncommon in cats. Other causes of anxiety in cats include bringing a new animal into the home, rearranging the house, moving home, or stress/trauma affecting their humans.

Preventing Anxiety in your Pets

Prevention is always the best way to go, and the best way to prevent anxiety is through the thorough socialisation of puppies from the age of 8-16 weeks. The time from 8-12 weeks is about 10 times more important than the time from 12-16 weeks. Make sure you get your puppy at 8 weeks if you can, better no later than 10 weeks.

Then you'll want to get really busy taking your pup everywhere, exposing them to all sorts of new sights, sounds and experiences. Dr Ian Dunbar recommends that every puppy be picked up, patted, and handled all over by at least 100 different people in this puppy socialisation period.

You may be thinking 'But what if my pup hasn't had all their vaccinations?'

Fair question. Personally, I believe that the risk of disease is outweighed by the importance of good socialisation. A week after the first vaccination, I'd be taking my pup everywhere, with one important exception. I would not take a young pup to high pet traffic areas like pet parks etc. And if you're particularly cautious, you can drive to all sorts of places, and sit in your car, exposing your pup to new stimuli with greater safety.

You should give your pup 3 days to settle into their new home - then have a huge party, with 20, 30, 50 or more friends coming to visit, laugh, people with hoodies, hats, caps, beards, and different skin colours. This is a great way to help prevent anxiety.

If your pup startles and shows signs of fear with any new thing in this period, don't fuss over them too much. Don't comfort them too much, give your pup space to find the time to self-regulate from fear into calm. If you comfort them too much, they will depend on you for their self-regulation, and that's not healthy.

A good strategy is to sit or squat down beside your pup, and simply place a hand on them, nice and still. Be with your pup while they work through this new experience themselves. This builds resilience and is the beginning of teaching your pup how to self-regulate from arousal (fear, fight/flight) back into relaxation (rest/digest).

Of course, if your pup is in severe distress, then it is absolutely appropriate to comfort them strongly until they get back into a steadier state and can be more able to self-regulate.

I strongly recommend a good puppy school (make sure it's not a free for all), and then, don't stop! Move straight into regular obedience training. Activities such as nose work or tracking are also great to help dogs be calm and happy. All scent-based activities are particularly good to help ease and prevent anxiety.

Another way to look at prevention is to act on treating the early, very subtle signs of anxiety immediately before it escalates into a real problem.



Holistic Treatment of Anxiety in your Pets

Before we dig into the nuts and bolts of helping anxious pets, I want to talk a little about my holistic philosophy when it comes to veterinary medicine. I believe that to have a truly holistic approach, you need to seriously consider all the options. And that definitely includes prescription medications. I prescribe these when I see that they are necessary.

So I invite you to consider using them if your pet has severe problems or escalating problems. They can be a literal lifesaver. Not that they are EVER my automatic first choice! Of course, I tend to try more natural and alternative interventions and treatments for pets with milder anxiety. However, if none of them works, then prescription medications may bring a massive increase in quality of life for the pet (and for the pet's human family!).

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Formulating an anxiety treatment plan for your anxious pet

One thing you need to know. Treating anxiety in pets can be a slow, frustrating process, with gains and then regressions in the problem as life presents different challenges and triggers. You'll need to be patient, devoted and dedicated. Never give up!

I believe that a multi-modal approach will give the best results - the more things you can find that make difference, the better. But it's also important not to get overwhelmed by trying to do everything all at once. Pick one, two or three things to start with, get them integrated, solid, and a strong habit, then start adding one or two other things, get them solid, and so on.

Here is a range of things to consider when formulating your pet's anxiety treatment plan. They are all important! I strongly recommend keeping a journal of your pet's progress from day to day, with what you're doing to help them. This can be invaluable in helping you stay focused, and measure what is working best.

One very important principle is that you should NEVER allow your pet to be pushed into the orange or red zones. As soon as you see the signs of any orange zone activity, you need to start taking action to get your pet back into yellow, or preferably green.

Here's what you need to consider!

Environmental factors

You create your pet's environment. Your home can be modified to help anxious pets feel safer, happier, and calmer. Be aware of stimuli that are a trigger for your anxious pup, and do everything in your power to minimise them. For example, if you have a sound-phobic pet, and it's new years' eve, don't go out to party and leave your pet at home alone. I haven't been out for New Year celebrations for years, because my whippet is afraid of fireworks, so I simply have to stay home, and hold her little paw through it all.

Another important environmental effect you have on your pet is how much play and activity they have. The more arousal stimulating activity you do with your pet, the more you'll bias your pet's resting state into low levels of arousal, rather than healthy relaxation.

One of the first recommendations I make with anxious pets (if they are ball or toy crazy) is to take all the toys away, put them where the pet can't see them, and only have one or two five-minute play sessions each day. If your pup has a toy addiction, there will be a withdrawal period!

Another thing you can do is calming games - scatter treats all across the yard to be sniffed out, use snuffle and lick mats etc.

Supporting and training relaxation for your pet

I reckon this is the true key to treating the root cause of anxiety. The first thing you do is to focus on relaxation as much as you can. Look at your pet, and how you interact with them.

What is stimulating?

What is calming?

Then do less and less stimulating, and more and more calming. If your pet goes nuts crazy bonkers at pet parks, well, don't go there! Get really sensitive to the signs of arousal (anxiety) in your pets, and be really proactive about de-escalating any arousal when you see it starting to ratchet up in your pet.

I find the healing power of loving, intentional, therapeutic touch a PROFOUND way to help pets move from being wired, aroused, and anxious.... Into a lasting state of calm and ease.

Through working hands-on with tens of thousands of pets over 27 years, I have discovered particular qualities of touch that cause a strong, body-level relaxation response. It can take the mind a few weeks or months to catch up with the body, but with daily relaxing bodywork, I constantly see beautiful improvements in anxious pets.

**If you want to learn more about this, drop into
www.wholeenergybodybalance.com**

Here are a couple of stories to illustrate how well it can work.

Klyde was a Staffie who came to me with severe separation anxiety. He was eating the house when left alone. Two weeks of the Whole Energy Body Balance™ Somatic Relaxation bodywork every day at home, and he was so chilled he wasn't even getting off his bed when his mum came home - and all the destructive behaviour was gone.

Then there was Daisy, 7-year-old Rotti who got over-excited when the grandchildren came to visit. She would be anxious, in their faces, non-responsive to commands, and licking them non-stop. Within weeks of using the relaxation massage, she was calm, happy, and no licking, allowing the kids to walk her around on the lead.

It makes a huge difference, and I prescribe it to every anxious animal I see. Why? Because it works at the root cause level- with every touch you are teaching your dog how to relax, and how to regulate themselves from arousal into relaxation.

It's super easy to learn, too!

Other touch/pressure based things that may help are thunder shirts and other pressure wraps.

And even if you haven't learned the specialised relaxation massage I teach, one simple way to start helping your dog to relax is simply slowing down the hand speed of your normal pats to $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{8}$ of the normal speed you use. The slower your touch, the more relaxing it is!



Working with your vet

Please do work with your vet. One big factor in anxiety is undiagnosed pain, and vets can help you find that. If examinations and imaging find nothing, I strongly suggest a pain relief trial, to see if that causes an improvement in the anxiety behaviours.

Even if your vet is not holistic, keep them in the loop with what you're doing. Feel free to not do what they suggest, too, but it's important the vet knows what treatments you're using if there is any kind of medical emergency.

Nutrition and supplements

A healthy, fresh, whole foods diet is really, really important too. Processed foods are inflammatory, which will tend to increase base arousal levels. Also, the flavourings and preservatives can have a terrible effect on anxious dogs (just think of red cordial for hyperactive kids).

The more healthy antioxidants you can get into your dog the better. Organic blueberries are a great way to do this, simply pop them in your dog's dinner.

Supplementing with Essential Fatty Acids can help too - I prefer Calamari oil for this.

There is a range of other nutraceuticals, which generally are best used under the care of a qualified health professional (vet, naturopath, herbalist etc).

And I really like CBD-rich whole-plant cannabis extracts (organically grown of course). Depending on where you live, you may be able to source and use this, or you may need to work with your vet. It can be very helpful as a part of a treatment plan for anxiety. If you are using it, you must inform your vet. There are several drugs that it may interact with.



Getting your pet's GUT healthy

There is a direct link between imbalances, inflammation and illness of any kind in the gut (especially dysbiosis - where the gut microbiome becomes damaged, or out of balance) and increased anxiety. The gut/brain axis is incredibly powerful, so everything you do to make your pet's digestive system, and especially their gut microbiome, healthy, strong, and vital, will be a key part of any pet anxiety treatment plan.

Feed a high-quality species appropriate fresh whole foods diet. Use organic ingredients if possible. Use a range of proteins rotated over time. And of course, there is a plethora of probiotic and pre-biotic supplements, as well as faecal transplant capsules and so on that you can use at home.

Pharmacological treatments

I get a lot of people who are simply automatically 'anti' any and all prescription drugs. If that's you, I invite you to have an open mind, especially if you have a pet with severe anxiety issues. While they are not something I use without good reason, I have seen some pets have really significant improvements in quality of life when on these medicines.

It's also important to realise that your pet doesn't always need to be on these medications for life. Sometimes 6-12 months on prescription medications, while you implement all the other kinds of treatments, gives that all time to work. And helps everything else work better, too!

You'll need to talk to your vet about these ones. Also please be aware that you may need to try several prescription medications before you find the one that 'clicks' with your pet.

Behavior modification

This is basically training, with LOADS of positive reinforcement. This can work by making a bad thing become good - every time the anxiety-provoking thing happens, they get yummys!

The three things behaviour modification can do are habituation (helping the pet get used to the 'bad thing' so it's no longer a problem), counter-conditioning (teaching a new behaviour that competes with the old, unwanted anxiety behaviour), and desensitisation (exposing the pet to a trigger that causes anxiety at such a low level that there is no response, then carefully increasing the intensity of the trigger over time).

A key principle here is to reinforce every time your pet shows the desirable behaviours - i.e. relaxation and calm. Then reward for what you want to see, in other words.

I recommend working with a skilled positive reinforcement pet trainer (if they use shock collars or choke chains, go nowhere near them). This is something that will take time and dedication, but it's also a very important and effective way to help anxious pets.



Alternative/complementary treatments

There are stacks of these. Some will be highly effective with some pets at some times, others may not make a lot of difference. It's well worth experimenting with them.

Alternative treatments may include (but are not limited to):

- Physical therapies: massage, bodywork, craniosacral, bowen, T-touch etc.
- Flower essences.
- Acupuncture, acupressure.
- Herbal medicine: Traditional Chinese Medicine, Western Herbal Medicine.
- Energy healing: Whole Energy Body Balance™ method, Reiki, and many others.
- Animal communication.
- Vet-Recommended Essential Oils (Used With Caution)
- Pheromones.
- Music.



Wrapping it all up

Anxiety in pets is very common. And there is SO MUCH you can do to help your anxious pups move to stay calm, at ease and relaxed. It'll probably take a team of pet health professionals, and a good measure of dedication and devotion, but in nearly all cases, you can help your anxious pets out of sight.

Thanks for coming on this journey of learning with me!

I know it will benefit your animals greatly when you apply the Understanding, Recognising, Preventing and Treating Anxiety Holistically in Dogs to their lives.

To learn more, please check out my



www.thehealingvet.com



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