



# Pet Behavior Counseling

*Helping you and your pet become best friends for life.*

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The following are typical questions people ask about our pet behavior counseling services.

## **What is Pet Behavior Counseling?**

Pet Behavior Counseling involves working with you and your pet to resolve problem behaviors. Typical behavior problems we deal with include aggression and biting, separation anxiety, inappropriate urination and defecation, obsessive-compulsive like behaviors, food, toy or space guarding, fears and phobias and other stress related behaviors.

Our goal is to help you better understand the normal and abnormal behavioral patterns of your pet's species, as well as understanding the individual needs of your particular pet. We provide you with a behavior modification protocol to assist in the resolution of the problem behavior. Here at Green Acres we also recommend treatment with Bach Flower Remedies for most behavior cases.

## **How Does Pet Behavior Counseling Differ from Training?**

Ideally, training should be proactive. You start with a puppy or kitten and teach them how to successfully live in the human world, while also attending to their own unique needs as a different species. Training focuses on teaching a pet desirable **behaviors** and good manners like using the litter box, sitting on a cue, walking nicely on a leash, scratching appropriate objects and coming when called. Management is used to prevent behaviors that you do not like.

Behavior counseling focuses on the animal's **emotional state** in addition to teaching behaviors. A client typically seeks behavior counseling because their pet is acting in a manner that they find concerning or frustrating. What is an important distinction here is that the animals are equally anxious in these situations. Unfortunately, for our animals, all too often a significant period of time has passed before a guardian realizes the severity of the behavior and help is sought. For this reason, behavior modification can take much longer than training, since we are not only trying to teach alternate behaviors, but also change an animal's emotional state.

NOTE: A dog training class will seldom resolve behavior problems such as fear, anxiety or aggression and in fact is more likely to make those types of problems worse. If you have a dog that is fearful, anxious or aggressive you should meet with a qualified pet behavior consultant for an evaluation before enrolling your dog in any training class. A dog trainer is not necessarily qualified to make such an assessment.

## **Do Many Pets Need Behavior Counseling?**

Most pets will probably never need to see a behavior counselor. However, the number of animals being seen for behavior problems is increasing just as the number of people needing professional counseling is also on the rise. As lifestyles become more chaotic and hectic, stress increases and stress affects everyone in the family, not just the humans. When one is stressed, whether a person or a pet, they are more prone to behavioral and emotional problems. Today, families are so busy with jobs, school, and extracurricular activities that often they do not have the time to provide their pets with the physical and mental interaction that the animals need to be behaviorally stable. When those needs are not met, problems frequently develop.

## **When Do I Know My Pet Needs Professional Help?**

People, even loving and responsible guardians, too often fail to see and heed the warning signals that their pets are giving to them that there may be a problem brewing. If your pet displays any behavior or emotional state that concerns you, it is best to discuss this with a professional as soon as possible. While it may be nothing, it may also be the start of a behavioral pattern that may rapidly spiral downward. When weeks, months or even years pass by, the chances of a positive outcome become slimmer. Once people recognize their pet has a behavior problem, the sooner they start working with a **qualified** pet behavior counselor the better the prognosis for resolving the problem and the less frustration for both people and pet.

## **Why Is Seeking Prompt Help So Important?**

We still do not understand with 100% certainty how the brain works. However, one of the things we do know is that the more a behavior is repeated, whether a “good” or “bad” behavior, the more habitual it becomes. For example, if a dog has been growling and charging individuals walking by the house for the past three months, it is going to be much more difficult to treat than if the client had contacted us within a week of this behavior starting. The brain actually rewires itself as behaviors are rehearsed, making the same response more and more likely. The cases where this has been going on for a year or more are even more difficult. That is not to say these dogs cannot be helped, but by this time most clients are incredibly frustrated which only exacerbates the situation. The longer a problem has been occurring, the longer it takes to treat and resolve, and the poorer the prognosis for a total cure.

## **Can't I Fix This On My Own?**

Often people try to resolve problems on their own without qualified help; instead seeking advice from friends and family, outdated books, the internet, or TV shows with “celebrity” trainers that advise you “not to try this at home”. Doing nothing is bad enough, but doing the wrong thing may quickly make problems much worse. Even people that have excellent relationships with their pets and a solid understanding of learning can benefit from an objective opinion. Sadly, by the time most people come to a pet behavior counselor, we are often the last resort before they decide to consider getting rid of their companion.

## **What Do People Do That Make These Problems Worse?**

Aside from not dealing with a behavior problem promptly, another serious mistake people make with behavior problems is to punish the pet for the behavior. Often this is

due to fear, embarrassment or misinformation about the species in general and how to handle these situations. Punishment can come in many forms and should be thought of as levels on a continuum. It may be as overt as hitting and shocking an animal or as subtle as sprays with a water bottle or dirty looks. Fear is the root cause of many behavior problems, and punishment only exacerbates the fear and anxiety, making the behavior worse.

People also make behavior problems worse when they unintentionally reward behavior with attention. We often see this with stereotypical behaviors like chasing shadows, chasing tails, etc. The first time people see a dog chase its tail they might think it is cute and laugh, which the dog finds rewarding, thus increasing the chances of repeating the behavior. While these behaviors may not seem serious at first, they can be the start of additional behavior problems and may also cause physical disabilities.

### **How Should One Choose A Pet Behavior Counselor?**

Very carefully! Sadly, there are a wide range of people claiming to be pet behavior counselors or animal behaviorists who do not have the requisite knowledge to truly and effectively help people and their pets. You would not select a heart surgeon who was not properly board certified in their field and it is equally unwise to select a pet behavior counselor without credentials.

There are three levels of qualified professionals that assist pets with behavioral problems. The level that is most accessible to people are practitioners who have been credentialed as Certified Dog Behavior Consultants (CDBC) or Certified Animal Behavior Consultants (CABC) by the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants. Those credentialed by the IAABC must demonstrate competency in counseling skills and social systems assessment, behavioral science, a general knowledge of animal behavior, genetics, neuropsychology, ethology and species-specific knowledge of healthcare, nutrition, husbandry, and behavior. Those certified are required to accumulate continuing education units on a regular basis. These individuals focus on the use of behavior modification protocols to treat animals.

The next tier of pet behavior counselors is Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists (CAAB). These individuals are credentialed by the Animal Behavior Society and typically have doctoral degrees in animal behavior or related fields. They focus on more difficult cases and the use of behavior modification protocols to treat animals. There are currently 43 such individuals in the United States.

At the top level are those who are credentialed by the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. A Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists uses the initials DACVB after their name. These are veterinarians who have completed an approved residency program in veterinary behavior and have passed a national board examination in that discipline. A board certified Veterinary Behaviorist specializes in clinical animal behavior and is able to diagnose and treat medical and behavioral problems, as well as prescribe medications to treat those problems. There are currently 35 such individuals in the United States, most of them in larger cities, major universities or veterinary schools.

Green Acres' Don Hanson is a Certified Dog Behavior Consultant. Don is also a Bach Foundation Registered Animal Practitioner (BFRAP). This means he has completed the

required courses and examinations to be credentialed by the Dr. Edward Bach Foundation in the use of the Bach Flower Remedies for the treatment of animals.

## **How Does Pet Behavior Counseling Work?**

The specifics of how counseling works will vary with each practitioner. Typically, all consults start with a telephone call and a recommendation that the animal have a complete veterinary workup to rule out any medical causes for the behavior problem. The next step may or may not involve you completing questionnaires before going to see the counselor. The best pet behavior counselors will insist on seeing the animal in person, or minimally, a videotape in the case of a long distance consultation. Avoid counselors that offer to treat your pet via phone, FAX or email, without ever seeing the animal. Behavior can be very complex and should be observed first hand by a trained professional.

At Green Acres, counseling begins with a telephone inquiry. After establishing the nature of the problem, we may recommend that you take your pet to their veterinarian for a medical exam to rule out physical causes for behavioral concerns. Once a medical problem has been ruled out, you will be asked to fill out a detailed history form on your pet. The more time you take and the more details you provide, the better we can help you and your pet.

In addition to completing the appropriate questionnaire, you will need to sign a waiver of liability and aggression disclaimer, and send us a referral letter from your veterinarian. The Bach Foundation has a very strict code of practice, which requires that their animal specialists have a veterinary referral before recommending Bach Flower Remedies for an animal.

Upon receipt of the history forms and veterinary referral, we will contact you to book your appointment. When you come in for your appointment, both Don and Kate will typically see you. Don will focus on talking with you while Kate watches your pet and records her observations. The average consultation lasts 60 minutes. At the completion of your appointment, Don will prepare the first bottle of Bach Flower Remedies for your pet. Within a week, you will receive a letter summarizing the consultation and listing recommendations for behavior modification, along with relevant handouts for you to read. A report will also be sent to the referring veterinarian. Don and Kate are available for follow-up, as required.

## **What Is A Behavior Modification Protocol?**

A behavior modification protocol uses both operant and classical conditioning to help your pet learn to offer alternate positive responses to undesirable behaviors. The content of the plan depends on the nature of the problem we are trying to address. A typical plan will consist of you working with your pet for short periods of time (5 to 10 minutes) for several regular sessions while minimizing stressful situations. All behavior modification methods used by Green Acres are based upon the principles of positive reinforcement and will consist of no punitive measures. Our motto here is: "Behaviors that are rewarded tend to be repeated." Depending upon the problem behavior, how long the behavior has been exhibited and the individual animal, a behavior modification program may be successful in as little as two weeks, or may take over a year to obtain desired results.

## **What Are the Bach Flower Remedies?**

The Bach Flower Remedies are all natural, herbal preparations developed in the 1930's to help restore health by balancing one's emotional state. While originally intended for use with people, today they are also effectively used for treating many behavioral problems with animals. The Bach Flower Remedies are especially beneficial when treating problems involving fear or anxiety. The number of behavior modification sessions can often be reduced if, rather than stressed, a pet is calm and relaxed and thus more open to learning. In his practice, Don has successfully used the Bach Flower Remedies for several years.

More information on the use of Bach Flower Remedies with pets can be found at our companion web site [www.bachflowersforpets.com](http://www.bachflowersforpets.com).

## **How Long Does It Take For A Pet To Get Better?**

This is the question all clients want answered and the one that is practically impossible to provide with any degree of accuracy. There are a plethora of variables that affect resolving concerning behaviors. The only thing that is certain is that if a client fails to address a behavior problem it will get worse. How quickly a pet recovers will depend on; the pet's inherent personality, their age, how long the behavior has been occurring, the type of problem, the client's inherent personality, compliance to management, the behavior modification protocol and treatment with the Bach Flower Remedies. I have seen some pets make dramatic progress in a week, others that take over a year to resolve and some that never resolve. Most behavioral problems require a strong commitment on the part of the guardian to help see their pet through. Doesn't your pet deserve this?

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