

FEAR FREE SHELTERS

Protecting the Emotional Wellbeing of Shelter Pets

Presented by Dr. Marty Becker

Fear Free addresses the emotional wellbeing of the shelter team, the animals you care for, and the people who adopt them. By creating a Fear Free shelter, we make everyone involved feel better.

Fear, anxiety, stress (FAS), and frustration are usually high in shelter animals. Learning to recognize, prevent, and treat these emotional conditions improves:

- ✔ Animal health
- ✔ Animal happiness
- ✔ Appeal to adopters
- ✔ Appeal to foster caregivers and volunteers
- ✔ The working environment for the shelter staff
- ✔ Relationships with the community

In shelters, our goal is to get animals out of the shelter, back to their families or habitat, into foster environments (if available), or adopted into a permanent home or a working home for feral cats.

Better yet, our goal is to prevent them from entering the shelter to begin with whenever possible. But for those who do enter the shelter doors, there's an unfortunate mindset that we see: the "Get 'Er Done" mentality.

We know the pets are stressed and fearful, but we believe the best thing we can do for them is get past the bad parts as fast as possible, so they can "relax" in a kennel run or go home.

What this approach overlooks is that experiencing fear, anxiety, and stress causes lasting emotional harm to animals. They enter a new and terrifying place, like an animal control truck or the intake area in the shelter. They start associating these environments and people with terror.

By the time they get to the kennel or the cage—or for pets seeing the vet, back in the carrier or car—those lessons have been learned and are well on the way to being hardwired.

As the pet continues to experience these stimuli in the shelter environment, the associations are deepened. They don't know what's going on, and they don't feel safe. They associate that terrible feeling with the place, the people, the sounds, the smells, and the other animals around them. Their emotional suffering escalates, and the association is reinforced.

Even with the best of intentions, many who care for the animals don't recognize signs of deep stress, such as feigned sleep or learned helplessness. They think these pets are "calm" when in fact they're suffering extreme stress. This is possible to spot once you know what to look for (as many of you do already!).

This is particularly true of cats, who suffer from stress-related physical illness as well as emotional distress. But dogs, too, develop many stress-related behaviors in shelters, which can make them less appealing to adopters.

Hurting Them Hurts You

Exposure to stressed animals creates burnout, emotional damage, and unhappiness in shelter staff and volunteers. No one goes into animal welfare to make life worse for animals, so what if instead you could be surrounded by happy pets?

Solving this problem is why we created the Fear Free Shelter Program and why it's available at no cost to all shelter, rescue, and animal welfare staff and volunteers. Fear Free techniques protect the emotional health of pets, focusing on creating and maintaining a state of psychological or behavioral wellbeing.

These are the key elements of the course:

- Recognize things that might stress out cats and dogs and avoid them.
- Increase creature comforts (even the simplest things, like a soft bed or something nice to chew on or scratch, make a huge difference).
- Provide positive, predictable interactions and consistent routines.
- Read and understand emotional cues.
- Work with the shelter veterinary team to implement medication for animals experiencing FAS to prevent suffering and a worsening of their health and behavior.
- Realize that animals pick up on social cues from other animals.
- Consider that "emotional contagion"—where an individual begins to share the emotional state of a close individual with whom they spend a lot of time—may have impacted surrendered or impounded pets.
- Help calm pets by being calm yourself.
- Avoid having a hostile or unpleasant workplace, as it will affect the animals as well as the humans.

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You'll also learn the three pillars of Fear Free:

- **Considerate Approach:** Recognizing all the sensory and environmental input that a pet might experience and using this information to approach the patient in the calmest, least confrontational way.
- **Gentle Control:** Comfortably and safely positioning the pet to allow necessary procedures to be performed with minimal restraint and without causing undue fear, anxiety, and stress.
- **Environment & Enrichment:** The shelter environment can be extremely stressful to pets. It's critical that shelters minimize stressful stimuli and offer many options for enrichment to reduce that stress.

Why Emotional Wellbeing Matters

When animals are provided with consistent, predictable, and positive interactions and pleasant activities, they learn what to expect and can adapt and adjust to the routine. In other words, animals quickly learn consistent routines, and they will acclimate to a new environment much more quickly if they know who will be caring for them and when and that the experience will be a positive one.

Emotionally healthy animals:

- Function well in everyday life
- Learn new things
- Express states like joy, playfulness, and excitement
- Cope with and recover from stressful situations

For people who think that Fear Free is a luxury that few shelters can afford, we disagree. Fear Free is not a luxury at all. Most of what you learn in the course will cost you nothing to implement. A positive emotional environment can be promoted through the actions and attitudes of shelter staff, regardless of the physical structure of the shelter. Sometimes it's as simple as learning to speak or use your body in a different way, or more about what you are already observing.

The goal is to always create a Fear Free environment for the animals and people in your shelter and set adopters and foster caregivers up for success when they take these animals home.

For more info:

Fear Free Shelters

www.fearfreeselters.com

Taking the Fear Out of Sheltering

Brenda Griffin, DVM, MS, DACVIM, DABVP

<https://humanepro.org/magazine/articles/taking-fear-out-sheltering>

Fear Free: Helping Shelter Pets Find Health, Happiness, and Homes

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