



# How Trainers Can Help Animals in Pain

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Fear Free Certified animal trainers have pledged to use practices that “protect and promote the physical and emotional wellbeing of animals.” That promise includes, among many other things, helping animals to be as pain free as possible. Although trainers are not medical professionals and cannot diagnose conditions or prescribe medications, there are still several ways in which we can use our expertise to help veterinarians help animals in pain.

## No longer “optional”

For a long time training was viewed as a “luxury” by many pet owners, and that was often the case for pain management medications and therapies as well. But times are changing, and owners are realizing that we really do owe it to our pets to give them every chance possible to live not only longer lives, but happier and more comfortable lives. It’s not enough to just “keep them alive as long as possible” anymore. We are recognizing that a high quality of life is no longer optional, but essential, for our pets. We are more willing to devote resources to pain medications and other complementary therapies to improve our pets’ comfort and their enjoyment of day-to-day activities.

The dizzying range of pet nutrition supplements and “remedies” that have sprung up over the last decade (some with some clinical evidence and many others without) is a testament to the fact that people are willing to spend more money than ever in an effort to try and help their pets. The *intent* is there.

But, one thing owners often still miss is signs of pain in their pets. Of course any pet owner will rush the dog or cat to the vet if he is whimpering in pain or in obvious distress. But, most pets in pain – particularly those in chronic pain – do not cry out or vocalize. Humans might moan and groan (or curse!) when our bum knee or bad back is acting up. But animals instead show more subtle physical signs of being in pain that often get inadvertently overlooked. The dog who is slow to rise and appears stiff after a nap is often thought of as “just tired.” If Fluffy is reluctant to climb stairs, she is



perhaps thought of “just being stubborn.” When Fido is dragging his nails on the pavement on his daily walks, is he just “too lazy to pick his feet up” or might there be another reason?

## How trainers and behavior consultants can help

Fear Free, and by extension its certified trainers’, mission is to prevent and alleviate fear, anxiety and stress in pets. We have plenty of evidence to show us that pain *causes* fear, anxiety, and stress. Trainers alone can’t fulfill our mission to relieve an animal’s stress if it’s being caused by physical pain. We need the help of a veterinarian skilled in treating that pain.

Trainers and behavior consultants who are already working with the animals can sometimes help identify an animal in pain. We are usually skilled observers of behavior and are typically more astute than the average pet owner at noticing things like changes in gait. Since pain treatment starts with the initial recognition that the animal is in pain, the sooner that recognition can happen, the better for the animal.

- A skilled trainer or behavior consultant is adept at describing what an animal is doing in terms of observable behavior. So, instead of saying, “Fido is walking funny” and leaving it at that so that now the veterinarian must do some detective work, a trainer or behavior consultant is much more likely to say, “I notice his gait seems unsteady; it looks like he’s not bearing full weight on the right rear leg. Here’s a video I took of that.” Now the veterinarian has a more useful starting point at least and can take it from there with a full exam and diagnostics. So, when trainers and behavior consultants notice what we think might be a pain-related behavior change, we can be quick to point that out to our clients and recommend they take their pets to the veterinarian for an exam. And we can suggest language that’s more descriptive about what’s going on and encourage them to shoot a video.
- Since trainers typically see a given pet far more frequently than a veterinarian does, another potential pain indicator that we might notice before a veterinarian has the chance to is a sudden failure to perform a well-known behavior when cued. Perhaps the dog refuses to perform his “spin” behavior today or he is sitting much more slowly and tentatively than usual. There could be many reasons for this, but trainers realize that if it’s sudden, and there are no discernible distractions, stress factors, or training problems preventing the animal from performing the behavior, then pain could certainly be a factor. Again, we can let our clients know to visit their veterinarian for an evaluation.



- A trainer is also sometimes the first person a pet owner seeks out when an undesirable behavior suddenly emerges. Take the example of inappropriate elimination. We know that that particular problem is sometimes caused by an underlying medical issue and are quick to recommend a veterinary visit first to rule out any potential health conditions. The pet owner just wants the dog to stop peeing on the rug or the cat to stop peeing outside the litterbox, so they pick up the phone and call a trainer. They are not wrong to want the house soiling to stop! But they aren't usually thinking there might be a pain or other medical component.
- Once a pain management therapy has been started by the veterinary team, trainers and behavior consultants can then use our observation skills to help the client monitor the animal's behavior for changes that might be useful to the veterinary team in determining if a given therapy is effective. We're less susceptible to any placebo effect since it's not our animal, and we are more likely to notice an improvement (or a decline) if we only see the animal once a week as opposed to every day like the client does.
- If an animal needs to be on crate rest or other post-op exercise restriction, most trainers have a wealth of great low-movement enrichment ideas to provide to clients. We can help keep pets happy and calm and stave off boredom during recovery. We can also help the client ensure the animal doesn't "overdo it."

By using our own observation skills, teaching our mutual clients to become more astute observers of their pets' behaviors, encouraging them to seek veterinary guidance sooner, and providing enrichment ideas, trainers can help veterinarians achieve the mutual goal of improving animals' overall wellbeing. By decreasing their pain level, we also decrease their stress level, and that is at the very heart of Fear Free's mission!