

PROTOCOL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND TREATING GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER

Overview of Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is defined as consistent exhibition of increased autonomic hyperreactivity (increased heart rate, increased respiratory rate, changes in gastrointestinal activity, and dilated/enlarged pupils associated with distress), increased motor activity, and increased vigilance and scanning that interferes with a normal range of social interaction, *and* that occurs in the absolute absence of what would be considered a truly provocative stimulus. In other words, these dogs or cats are reactive before any noticeable stimulus or trigger sets them off, and they do not easily habituate to or learn to ignore anything that arouses them.

Situations in which dogs react when exposed to new social stimuli (dogs, cats, humans) may reflect an animal version of social anxiety. Caution is urged because closer inspection may indicate that the human or animal is just another unfamiliar stimulus, so that the criteria for GAD are met. This distinction is important because behavior modification will need to address all reactive situations.

The danger with this diagnosis is that it is very specific, but could easily and carelessly be made in the absence of critical thought or incomplete history. To some extent any dog or cat who reacts inappropriately in any circumstance could be said to be exhibiting generalized anxiety, but for the conditions of this diagnosis to be met, the focus of the stimulus must be general, not specific, and the behaviors aren't directed toward a discrete or limited set of conditions (e.g., other dogs, being left alone, et cetera). These animals may destroy during one of their bouts of extreme distress, but not during another, and there is no true pattern focusing on destruction itself. GAD should be a diagnosis of last resort, not first, and your dog's or cat's characteristically anxious signs should be present under conditions where any of these signs would have subsided in a "normal" or nonsymptomatic animal. This is one condition where a truly exhaustive history is needed.

GAD is a diagnosis that may also include general reactivity to unfamiliar individuals (animal or human). Whether this is the equivalent of human, social anxiety disorder, is difficult to know because of the dependent nature of dogs on people. Dogs who worry about social interactions also tend to react to new environments, physical, auditory, and olfactory stimuli, et cetera, and so meet the criteria for GAD. The distinction between GAD and what has been called "social anxiety disorder" may be less important in terms of treatment because the medications and behavior modification used to treat GAD will also help social anxieties. However, *understanding that reactive dogs can generalize their responses to a variety of situations, left untreated, is essential.* You will need to watch for changes in severity of response during treatment, and should watch to see if the number of categories in which your dog responds increases, decreases, or stays the same.

Finally, these cats and dogs appear to never truly relax, although they may be more relaxed and appear happy in totally predictable and protected physical and social environments. This pattern can make assigning the diagnosis of GAD difficult in some circumstances.

It's also important to ensure that your dog or cat is not suffering from any medical concern because the signs

associated with GAD are truly nonspecific. In fact, an animal in pain can look exactly like an animal with GAD. You may note that your dog's or cat's wariness is way out of proportion to other pets' "startle" responses, that the patient is a light sleeper and awakes and startles easily, and that the intensity of the response is out of proportion to the stimulus.

Many dogs and cats with GAD also exhibit conditions for which their people may have already sought help, for example, frequent vomiting, frequent diarrhea, "itchiness" and scratching, rashes, et cetera. Many animals diagnosed with chronic or intermittent diarrhea associated with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) may also have some anxiety-related condition. Unless the veterinarian is accustomed to looking for behavioral conditions, she may not think to ask about anxieties, and so will miss the flag that IBS provides for early diagnosis of anxiety. *You need to ensure that you know what normal is, and that you are persistent and forthright in reporting any and all behaviors that you find worrisome. Helping dogs and cats with behavioral problems requires a good dialog with your veterinarian and sometimes some gentle persistence from you if your veterinarian has had little or no training in behavioral medicine.*

Treatment of Generalized Anxiety Disorder

It's actually easier to use behavior modification if the focus to which the animal reacts is discrete (one or two things). The more circumstances in which an animal reacts, the more difficult and lengthy behavioral treatment will be. Because animals with GAD generalize their anxieties, they can also be encouraged, with time, work, and usually medication, to group sets of anxious situations together so that they improve by leaps rather than an infinite set of baby steps.

GAD is the one condition that absolutely requires that you be able to recognize progressively calmer behaviors, and the physical signs that correlate well with underlying physiological states indicating a calmer response. These signs of calm *must* be rewarded. It's sometimes hard to do this because if you are too excited, the cat or dog begins to worry again. Rewards here should be directed at encouraging continued calm. This means that grooming, if the animal likes it, massage, and slow petting with gentle pressure should be encouraged. The foundation behavior modification programs, the **Protocol for Deference**, the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**, and the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**, are essential for these pets. These programs likely will provide these pets with the only rule structure that they can understand—except the one that tells them to always worry. These behavior mod programs, if practiced correctly, will allow you to "break through" the anxiety and allow your pet to experience a different way of looking at the world. As your dog or cat improves, he will continually rely on what he learned in these programs so that he can react less.

Because good, aerobic exercise correlates with decreases in some forms of anxiety in humans, we have reason to believe that the same correlation may hold for cats and dogs. Dogs are easier to exercise than cats, but the trick with cats is to find the right stimulus. For many anxious cats, complex toys will be too noisy and unpredictable, but chasing a feather

may be just right. Anything that can increase the aerobic component of your pet's activity without triggering anxiety should be included.

By definition, it's almost impossible to avoid all the triggers for GAD. If you can identify three or four of the most provocative stimuli for your pet (e.g., traffic, sudden movement, vacuum cleaners, et cetera) and avoid those while working with calming gestures and the behavior mod, your pet may begin to be able to ignore certain stimuli. Once there is at least one former trigger that your pet can ignore, it's possible to have hope that he will continue to improve. Again, improvement often comes in clusters, and you need to prepare for the "drought" when little improvement seems possible.

A lot has been written in the popular press about the roles for canine and feline "pheromones" for improving behavior. These compounds are not true pheromones. They are derived from natural waxy secretions that may contain compounds that stimulate animals to be more social. There are few controlled studies on these products, and no one knows how or if they function. It is possible that if they function they do so by encouraging a calming effect. If you are reasonable in your expectations and don't mind the expense, for some cases involving anxiety, these products may appear to be useful, but we know so little about how or if they work that their use is not truly based on evidence.

Once fully established, it's unlikely that any animal can recover from GAD without medication. In fact, it may be

inhumane to ask them to try to do so because we humans have a pretty steep learning curve before we can work well with the behavior modification protocols. Medications of choice are usually the selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs). The SSRIs most commonly and successfully used are paroxetine (Paxil) and sertraline (Zoloft). If true panic is involved, a "panicolytic" medication that stops the panic, like the benzodiazepine alprazolam (Xanax), may be needed. Panicolytic drugs should be used as needed to stop or prevent truly crippling events, in combination with daily use of an SSRI. Because SSRIs take a minimum of 3 to 5 weeks to cause changes in proteins made in brain cells, patience is truly a virtue during treatment. In this interval, you may find that they need to use benzodiazepines more often (4 to 6 times a day). That's fine as long your dog or cat is not simply being sedated.

The ideal treatment for long-term management of GAD involves daily sessions where relaxing is emphasized, regular practice of the behavior modification protocols, and appropriate use of medication. Medication is likely to be lifelong, although the dose may be decreased with time. Because GAD is one of the conditions that is often co-morbid (i.e., occurs) with other behavioral conditions, you may need to work especially hard to avoid and then desensitize your dog or cat to provocative stimuli. Any reduction in the signs of GAD is generally a signal that the other conditions can resolve and largely be controlled, also.