

Strange Canine Behavior and Disorders

Severe behavior disorders can be successfully treated.

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As useful as these drugs are, veterinary behaviorists caution dog owners not to rely on drugs as a sole source of problem resolution. As Reisner emphasizes, "Drugs are almost never used by themselves in an attempt to change undesirable canine behaviors. Generally the most often-prescribed medications are human antidepressants, used in dogs for anxiety rather than depression, such as serotonin reuptake inhibitors (fluoxetine/Prozac), and a veterinary drug Clomicalm (clomipramine). These are almost always used in association with behavior, management, and environmental changes. We also spend a great deal of time explaining safety strategies, e.g., risks of biting and the best way to avoid provocative situations. There is no 'cure' for aggression, especially through drug therapy. On the other hand, drug therapy is not a last resort, but rather a very rational part of the treatment plan for most dogs."

At Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, veterinary behaviorist Nicholas Dodman, director of the Animal Behavior Clinic, indicates that 60 percent of the clinic's behavior cases are aggression-related. "There are a number of kinds of aggressive disorders such as owner-directed aggression where the dog attacks the primary caregiver; prey or predatory aggression is triggered by small, moving animals (or children) who may then be attacked; fear aggression occurs when the dog reacts aggressively to a fear-inducing stimulus."

In his book *If Only They Could Speak* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2003), Dodman describes the use of Prozac and other medications that assist in correcting unacceptable and sometimes debilitating behaviors. He worries about the abandoned and euthanized dogs that have been shut off from their human companions due to behavioral problems that, in many cases, could be successfully corrected with a combination of training and medication.

Another alternative is pheromones. Pheromones are odor molecules that mimic natural odor-producing substances. The product D.A.P. (Dog Appeasing Pheromone), sold as a spray or diffuser through veterinarians or over-the-counter under the name Comfort Zone with D.A.P., has a soothing effect through its impact on specialized receptors in the dog's nasal passages. "This product is an excellent non-medicinal alternative that has demonstrated its ability to induce a reassuring effect on the dog through the use of pheromone technology," says Anne Robertson, public relations director of Farnam Companies, Inc. "It is one more tool the veterinarian can utilize in assisting with behavior modification efforts. It has no drug-induced effects such as sedatives and SSRIs have, so it has appeal for those situations where dog owners prefer a more natural option to assist with some undesirable behaviors."

Dodman admits that perhaps 1 or 2 percent of aggressive dogs cannot be rehabilitated, and do present a serious danger to people and other pets. But these dangerous "non-responders" are not the dogs filling the shelters.

The message is this: If you have a serious behavioral problem with your dog, there are encouraging treatment options. Behavior modification with intelligent retraining, and the use of available medications and products, may return rewards far exceeding your expectations. Your reward will be an improved quality of life for yourself as well as your dog.