

## ACUTE MANAGEMENT OF PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

Management is critical for any behavioral problem. It serves to provide safety and/or stops the escalation of the behavior while you work on a behavioral modification program.

**Safety:** Often there is potential for injury. Aggressive pets may harm targets via biting/scratching. In cases of anxiety or obsessive-compulsive disorders, the pet may inflict injury upon itself. Owners must engage in steps to protect the safety of others and the pet. Proper containment is indicated at all times. The level of containment will vary among cases but minimally should include secure property fencing or the pet being leashed when not enclosed in home property.

**Interrupting the escalation of the problem behavior:** When the pet engages in the undesirable behavior, there is usually pay-off/reinforcement for the pet. When a dog barks aggressively at a person passing by the house, the person's retreat rewards the aggressive display. When a dog urinates on the rug, the immediate relief of an empty bladder makes the pet more comfortable. The following steps will interrupt the escalation of the problem behavior:

**Identify and avoid triggers for undesirable behavior.** Examples follow:

**Interdog aggression:** Avoid high-density dog areas/times on walks; if you do encounter other dogs, create space between your dog and the other dog.

**Owner-directed aggression:** Avoid triggers, don't disturb when resting, don't allow dog on bed if dog is aggressive when disturbed in bed; feed dog without disturbances for food aggression, etc.

**Aggression to visitors to home:** Place dog in another area before allowing visitors in house.

**Dog with separation anxiety:** Avoid leaving alone in home for periods that evoke the distress.

**Don't respond to undesirable behavior with interactive aggression/punishment:** Punitive responses often escalate the problem. An animal in an aggressive state is highly aroused and highly reactive. Pets with aggression or other problem behaviors may have underlying anxiety. Aggressive responses will likely aggravate the condition and may result in injury.

**Don't respond to undesirable behavior with comforting:** While trying to reduce anxiety/distress, comforting from the dog's perspective is very similar to praise. The dog may misinterpret this interaction and think you actually like the undesirable behavior.

**Respond in a calm, controlled fashion to undesirable behavior:** If you find something after the fact (elimination/destruction), there is no helpful response. Clean it up and try to avoid the trigger circumstance that caused it in the future. If the pet is highly aroused and actively engaged in the undesirable behavior, try to remove the pet from the situation or remove the trigger for the behavior. Remain calm, give direction to the pet for an alternative behavior, such as obedience commands, and recognize that this is a damage-control situation; you are trying to prevent this episode from making things worse. Since the pet is highly aroused/reactive/upset, these are not good training opportunities. If the pet is too aroused to follow a command, try "changing the subject" by offering another activity the pet may want such as a ride in the car. This activity is used to divert the pet in a critical situation only; repeated use could inadvertently reinforce the undesirable behavior.