

Review Article

Why Psychology Matters in Veterinary Medicine



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As companion animals become more central to individuals and families, there are countless ways that veterinary medical practice can benefit from understanding *human* psychology. This article highlights how insights from the fields of health psychology and behavioral medicine might hold the potential to improve veterinary practice. We focus on key areas of care for companion animals that are integrally linked to their human caregivers' psychological reactions and behavior, including health maintenance, managing illness, and end-of-life care. We also note ways in which the challenges of skillfully negotiating interactions with companion animal caregivers and other stressful aspects of the veterinary profession may be informed by psychological and behavioral science expertise.

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Why Psychology Matters in Veterinary Medicine

The power of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary inquiry has been increasingly recognized. The cross-fertilization of knowledge across fields is considered the state of the art in cutting-edge science and practice.¹ A area where this has resulted in useful advances is in the practice of medicine through the influence of the interdisciplinary fields of health psychology and behavioral medicine. These fields were formed to bring the scientific contributions of psychology and behavioral science to the promotion and maintenance of health and apply their techniques and knowledge to illness prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation.^{2,3} Some of the important contributions from these fields include providing strategies to motivate health-related behavior change (e.g., in smoking, substance use, eating, and exercise), explicating the role of the doctor-patient relationship in treatment adherence, and developing effective interventions for coping with chronic and life-threatening illness and preventing practitioner burnout.^{4–6} As such, the necessity of including behavioral and social science training in medical school curricula is also increasingly recognized.^{7,8}

At the same time, the links between veterinary and human medicine are becoming stronger. Partnerships creating collaborative clinical trials that may benefit both human and animal patients are being formed, and procedures and treatments are now more readily borrowed across these 2 areas.⁹ For instance, an article in the *British Journal of Nutrition*, a nonveterinary journal, discussed nutrient guidelines for companion animals.¹⁰ In addition, veterinary professionals are well aware of the behavioral aspects of medical problems and also cite the ways in which an animal's change in behavior is often the impetus for pet owners to seek veterinary care.¹¹ Psychologists and other professionals are

increasingly interested in the contributions of animals, particularly companion animals, to human mental and physical well-being.^{12–18} Human-animal health and the human-animal bond are now being emphasized at major veterinary conferences.¹⁹ In a small number of collaborative projects, interdisciplinary partnerships have involved health psychologists and veterinarians, for instance, an intervention developed to increase exercise in dogs treated at a tertiary care clinic as well as in their owners.²⁰

The health and well-being of companion animals (we acknowledge that the types of animals cared for by humans include not only companion animals but also those such as racehorses, working dogs, and farm animals. The issues discussed here may also be relevant to veterinary professionals who interact with owners of these types of animals, but are likely most relevant to owners of companion animals.) and the beliefs and behavior of their human caregivers are intimately linked. Human caregivers are responsible for providing adequate shelter, nutrition, water, exercise, and preventative health and safety measures for their pets. Caregivers are also integral in adhering to necessary veterinary regimens and participating in decisions regarding treatment options and end-of-life care. The extent to which veterinarians can provide high-quality care to their patients hinges upon how effectively human caregivers understand and cooperate with recommendations for health maintenance and acute and chronic care. The extent to which human caregivers would understand and cooperate with veterinary professionals' recommendations and treatment plans for the well-being of pets is shaped by veterinary professionals' skill in communicating, empathizing, and facilitating useful decision making. Veterinary professionals' skill in interacting with pet owners may also depend on their ability to manage the unique stresses and strains of veterinary practice (e.g., "moral stress" brought about by ethical conundrums like convenience

euthanasia²¹) and to avoid burnout. Similarly, the success of the veterinary profession involves skillful education of pet owners regarding the importance of regular health visits and vaccinations, and understanding and addressing barriers (e.g., attitudinal, financial, and logistical) that they may face in adhering to recommendations.²²

In this article, we highlight the ways in which knowledge and insights from psychological and behavioral science might be fruitfully directed at enhancing effective veterinary medical practice and the well-being of veterinary professionals. We focus on key areas of caregiving for pets that result from human (i.e., their owners'—veterinary professionals' clients') psychological reactions and behavior. These include health maintenance, managing illness, and end-of-life care. We also note ways in which the challenges of skillfully negotiating these interactions with pet caregivers and other stressful aspects of the veterinary profession may be informed by psychological and behavioral expertise. We acknowledge that other insights from human behavior may translate to animal behavior. However, we restrict this discussion to the ways in which behavioral science research and knowledge are related to human interactions, reactions, and decision making in ways that affect veterinary medical practice and associated companion animal well-being.

The need for a field focused on enhancing the relationship among veterinarians, pet owners, and pets has grown in the past few decades. More Americans have become pet owners: 58% of US households owned a pet in 1988, 62% did in 2011,²³ and 70% did in 2012.²⁴ Pets also hold greater importance to individuals and families. One indicator is the overall increase in veterinary visits per year since the 1980s.²² In 2011, veterinary visits for dogs and cats were up to 190.9 million, an increase of 4.5% since 2006.²⁵ Before 2006, the number of veterinary visits per year for dogs rose from 80 million in 1987 to 119 million in 2001, and for cats it increased from 41 million in 1987 to 70 million. The use of sophisticated reconstructive procedures for pets has also increased, largely owing to growing demand from owners.²⁶ The amount of money spent on veterinary visits has also increased; between 2006 and 2011, the amount spent increased by 14%, reaching 26.5 billion dollars.²⁵ Other reports suggest that amount spent annually on veterinary care is near 11 billion dollars.²⁷

Beyond what pet owners spend on veterinary care, there are other nonessential expenses. In 2013, of the 55.72 billion dollars spent on pets, only 14.37 billion was for veterinary care and the remainder was for grooming, boarding, supplies, and food.²³

Perhaps because of increased demand, there has also been an increase in the number choosing to practice veterinary medicine. The number of veterinarians increased by 48% and the number of veterinary practices increased by 11% between 1996 and 2006.²⁸ Similarly, in 2010, there were a little more than 10,000 board-certified veterinary specialist certifications in the United States, a marked increase from the 3205 in 1987.²⁹

Additional evidence about the changing importance of pets comes from pet owners. A survey by the American Animal Hospital Association reported that 94% of pet owners considered their pet to have human-like characteristics and 93% reported that they would risk their lives to save their pets.²⁷ In another survey, 9 of 10 pet owners considered their pet to be part of the family.²⁴ In light of the central role that pets play in the lives of many people, maximizing their well-being and the ability of veterinary professionals to facilitate this is a growing priority for both animal owners and veterinary care providers.

Intersections of Health Psychology and Veterinary Medicine

Primary Prevention Behaviors

Health maintenance or primary prevention behaviors are those that can help to prevent or delay the onset of a health

condition. These behaviors can range from the relatively simple (e.g., a vaccination) to the complex (e.g., diet and exercise) and vary in terms of the amount of time, money, and effort needed to engage in the behavior. Furthermore, the veterinarian, owner, and pet are all in some way responsible for the success of the preventive measure, although most of the impetus falls on the owner as the surrogate decision maker for the pet.³⁰ Primary prevention measures are increasingly becoming more important, as chronic health issues among pets have become more common. Canine obesity, for example, is estimated to affect 22%–40% of dogs globally.³¹ Obesity can predispose pets to chronic illness, including diabetes mellitus, orthopedic, and cardiovascular diseases.³² Physical activity and dietary factors have been proposed as modifiable behaviors that can help in the prevention and management of obesity³³ and diabetes mellitus.³⁴ Although primary prevention behaviors, including diet, exercise, and preventive veterinary care, can help to reduce the likelihood of certain health conditions in pets, several barriers may stand in the way of adherence to these health behaviors, both for the veterinarian and the owner, suggesting the need for cooperation and commitment from all involved.

To provide the best preventive care for their patients, veterinarians need to be aware of the current guidelines for health behaviors and then must be able to discern the course of action for the best interest of the companion animal, given its age, gender, and unique situation. For example, in the case of vaccinations, veterinarians need to consider an individual animal's risk for a disease and features of the vaccine itself, such as its duration of immunity.^{35,36} In some cases, vaccinations are mandated by law, such as rabies.³⁶ Most vaccines, however, are considered either core vaccines, which are recommended for every animal (e.g., canine distemper virus and feline parvovirus), or non-core vaccines (e.g., feline leukemia virus), which are recommended based on risk of exposure.³⁷ Evidently, veterinarians must engage in a conversation with owners to determine which vaccinations are most appropriate given the specific characteristics of the pet.³⁷ In addition to making recommendations for pets, veterinarians must convince the owner of the need to adhere to them. Preventive care may not be seen as a priority by some owners because it does not address an immediate health threat, despite the fact that it can help avert several chronic health conditions that have modifiable health risk factors.

For most pet health maintenance practices, the owner must assume the responsibility for their initiation and continuation. In the case of vaccinations, the owner must make the final decision of whether the vaccine is to be administered. Factors that would influence this decision may include the cost of the vaccine and the vaccination schedule.³⁵ For more ongoing practices, the owners may need to be willing to alter their own behavior. Psychological research has shown that the way preventive information is framed can influence the effectiveness of a message. For instance, when prevention practices are framed in terms of the benefits of engaging in a behavior, "if you give heart worm medication to your dog regularly you can ensure the health of your pet," they are more likely to be heeded than if they are framed in terms of the consequences of not engaging in a behavior "if you do not give heart worm medication to your dog regularly you will compromise the health of your pet."³⁸ Similarly, visual reminders on calendars have been documented to be useful in promoting adherence to similar recommended monthly human health-related behaviors, such as breast self-examination in women,³⁹ so encouraging clients to make use of the calendar stickers often provided with heart worm medication is likely a sound strategy for promoting their regular administration to their pets.

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