

Keeping the Exotic Pet Mentally Healthy



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KEYWORDS

- Welfare • Behavior • Behavioral health • Mental health
- Positive reinforcement training

KEY POINTS

- Chronic psychological stress can have a detrimental effect on the health and welfare of exotic pets.
- Environments that expose animals to aversive stimuli from which they cannot escape, unresolvable social conflict, unpredictable circumstances, or situations resulting in frustration or conflict can be highly stressful.
- Exotic pets should be given opportunities to thrive that include opportunity for a well-balanced diet, to self-maintain, to express normal species-specific behaviors, and to have choice and control over their environments.
- Exotic pet environments should also provide them with opportunities that decrease the likelihood that physical injury or disease will go unnoticed.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, there has been a tendency to separate physical (medical) and mental (behavioral) health conditions and treat them as if they were 2 separate entities. In this article, the term *mental health* encompasses behavioral and emotional health. With improving technology and growing medical knowledge, we are learning that physical and mental states are intricately interconnected, and there is not a sharp distinction between them. Physical health changes mental health and mental health can have profound effects on physical health, in the short and the long term. The veterinary clinician is equally responsible for both. This interconnection can be challenging for clinicians who have been trained to consider only the physical condition of their patients.

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The nonverbal status of veterinary patients is always a challenge, and both domesticated and wild species have evolved excellent mechanisms for masking signs of physical disease. Caretakers of exotic pets should educate themselves about the species' normal means of communication and practice studious observation of the animal's visual cues (body language) and behaviors. It is only by being familiar with normal behaviors of an animal that a caretaker is able to recognize the subtle changes that indicate declining welfare or impending illness. Veterinarians often gain experience recognizing and appreciating signs of physical disease during their careers. They may have less experience recognizing mental illness and psychological stress. Appreciating these states can be more challenging but extremely important to the well being of the exotic pet.

DOMESTICATED VERSUS WILD?

Caretakers of exotic animals must be acutely aware of the difference between a species that is fully domesticated versus one that is wild. Although species such as rabbits, hamsters, ferrets, and Guinea pigs are referred to as *exotic* pets, they have been domesticated. Because of artificial selection for traits desired by humans over many generations, individuals of these species are generally less fearful of people, more tolerant of novelty, and better able to adapt to captive environments. On the other hand, reptiles, most species in the order Psittaciformes, prairie dogs, and sugar gliders (among many others) are not domesticated and, although able to be tamed, individuals retain wild characteristics that can make adaptation to living with humans highly challenging. When individuals are unable to adapt to a given captive environment, the resulting psychological stress can lead to poor welfare. The species' status as predator or prey should also be taken into account. Prey animals, such as rodents, rabbits, and birds are likely to be stressed by the presence of predators and predator odors. This stress must be taken into account when housing multiple species in the same home. In addition, for many species, even domesticated ones, humans can be perceived as potential predators, and their presence can be highly stressful to some individuals. For this reason, one of the most important aspects caretakers of exotic pets can do is to take the time to habituate the animals to human presence. This habituation can be done with regular gentle handling if the animal seems to tolerate it well. Handling should always be associated with the offering of favored food, toys, play, or grooming, depending on what the animal perceives as reinforcing. Again, determining the best reinforcer takes careful practiced observation to recognize what the animal values. If the animal is extremely frightened of human presence, then simply dropping favored food items into the cage every time a person walks by can be enough to slowly habituate an animal to human presence and actually teach the animal to view the human as something pleasant to be anticipated.

STRESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Stress has been defined in many ways, but for the purpose of this article, stress (or stressors) are defined as any physical, chemical, or emotional force that disturbs or threatens homeostasis, and the accompanying adaptive responses (the stress response) that attempt to restore homeostasis. The normal stress response is a result of the response of the sympathetic nervous system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. Within seconds of perceiving a stressor, the sympathetic nervous system secretes norepinephrine, and the adrenal medullae secretes epinephrine. This process prepares the body for a "fight or flight" response. The HPA axis is the body's primary physiologic stress response system.¹ When the HPA axis is triggered,

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