Behavior Tips: *How do I know if my dog is anxious or painful and what can I do?*

Introduction:
Signs of pain and anxiety in animals can appear similar and can be hard to discern, especially since animals are unable to speak for themselves. We can, however, look for physical signs and take history of the pet into account when trying to help our pets.

Fear is the response to a threatening situation, whereas anxiety is the anticipation of a threatening situation. Pain is defined as "A sensory and emotional response to noxious stimuli that is unique to the individual" (ACVAA). The physiological response of both pain and anxiety share some similarities in neurochemistry, brain regions involved and the activation of a stress response. Due to many similarities, we must look deeper into the signalment, history, co-existing diseases and physical parameters to help discern what is pain and what is anxiety.

Pain and anxiety similarities:
Many times, pets will have both pain and anxiety at the same time. Increased pain can lead to a stress response which makes an animal feel anxious. Increased anxiety can lead to things feeling more painful for your pet than they normally would have. Both pain and anxiety can affect your pet's normal body functions and lead to increases in disease severity and frequency.

If you think your pet is experiencing anxiety or pain the first thing to do is evaluate their mentation. Your pet may be startled more easily or they may become aggressive in situations when they may not have been in the past. When your pet is painful or stressed their brain tends to over-respond to the world around them. You may notice they are hyper-vigilant such as pacing around the house, always staring or hyper-focused, or over-reacting to noise stimuli that would normally not even register to your pet.

Another kind of pain your pet may feel is called *Social Pain*. This is when your pet enters a negative emotional state when left alone. Studies show that social pain is processed in the same area of the brain as physical pain. This is because domesticated dogs have evolved to be social creatures.

It is also important to rule out imposters of pain. This could include nausea so check if your pet has been vomiting or drooling excessively.

Pain and anxiety differences:
Since both pain and anxiety activate very similar or identical body systems there often isn't a clear way to determine if your dog is painful or if they're anxious. The best way to know is to identify a specific injury that could be causing your dog pain or to identify a specific stimulus that could be causing anxiety.

Destructive behavior, vigilance, and scanning are common signs noticed in an anxious dog. A painful dog is often less active will pay special attention to a specific region of their body that is experiencing pain. This attention can take the form of guarding the affected area or as increased scratching and licking of the area. A painful dog might assume an arched body posture. Many anxious dogs will seek human attention as a comfort, whereas painful dogs may become more timid or aggressive around people. Painful dogs may hide, but anxious dogs do not unless a specific fear is involved. A painful dog may whimper and whine, but only anxious dogs bark. Painful dogs often stare straight ahead, but anxious dogs monitor and scan.

Assessing your pet:
To help decide if your pet is experiencing pain or anxiety, you should consider aspects such as age, genetics, history, and individual variability.

Older dogs tend to grow more stoic with age and puppies tend to have more dramatic responses to stimuli. So, if you have an older dog showing signs of anxiety/pain, you know it may be less likely to be anxiety, but you cannot rule it out with just that information. If you know the parents or littermates of your dog, you may be able to ask their owners if they have experienced any anxious behaviors in their pets. This may help you take into consideration genetically predisposed anxiety. If your dog has a co-existing disease, the inflammatory nature of that disease may make them hypersensitive to pain. If they have a musculoskeletal disease that makes it hard for them to move around, it may be difficult to show differences in pain. It is important to know that each individual will also feel pain differently and their response to that pain is associated with personality. Dogs that are typically fearful, submissive and timid tend to have a lower pain tolerance. Dogs that are active, assertive and energetic tend to have a higher pain tolerance.

What can I do?
To decrease your pet's pain you can start by altering their environment. If you have hardwood floors you can put some rugs down. If they like to get up on the couch or the bed you can add a ramp so they do not have to jump.

https://www.mspca.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/image2.jpg

https://www.peta.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10 /0871.dog-under-bed.jpg

On the left, the dog is anxious. You can see that they are hiding and hyper vigilant. On the right the dog is in pain. Their posture is hunched and tight.

If your pet is anxious you can decrease the stimulation in the house to which they react. For example, decrease noise, use curtains, blinds and film to decrease outside visual stimuli like movement of other dogs.

If environmental management is not enough, then you can consult your veterinarian to see if medications should be added. For pain, veterinarians like to use what is called a 'multimodal' approach. This means they may give your pet more than one medication in order to control different kinds of pain, plus possibly physical therapy.

The treatment of anxiety also uses a multi-modal approach. For anxiety there are drugs that will take effect quickly and can be used for situational anxieties like thunderstorms. If your dog needs daily medication, then there are many medications that can be used long-term to help control anxiety. If your veterinarian doesn't feel that they can help with the anxiety, they may refer you to a specialist in veterinary behavioural medicine.

Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioral/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upei.ca) .

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