

Monitoring Your Pet's Behavioral Health

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To say goodbye to summer, over Labor Day, we took our Dalmatians Ashley and Mocha, on a four-day camping trip to the Wet Mountain Valley and the town of Westcliffe. The dogs had three consecutive days of outdoor activity, starting with re-exploring our 4 acres of property, hiking the Rainbow Trail, and ending up visiting beaver ponds on the Gibson Trail. Ashley probably covered 10 times the ground we did, as she ran up and down the hillsides while we and Mocha walked more sedately on the trails. She had a wonderful time, and the intense exercise did wonders for her mental health.

Regrettably, there was a down side to this for Ashley, as she came home with blisters and cuts on most of her pads. Although she didn't limp or slow down at all while hiking, when she got home she could hardly walk for a day. She healed rapidly however, and was quickly back to her old self.

We felt terrible about not checking the condition of her feet more often. As pet owners, we know the importance of consistently monitoring our pets' health. We take them for regular veterinary visits, monitor their weight, keep their nails trimmed, have their teeth cleaned at intervals, etc.

Unfortunately, most of us do not monitor our pets' behavioral health in the same consistent fashion as we do their medical health. Monitoring behavioral health means that we pay attention to our pets' conduct and take steps to ensure that we are meeting their behavioral needs.

Is your pet getting sufficient play time? If not, you may be seeing an increase in destructive behavior. Does your pet have sufficient opportunities to meet people outside the family? If not, you may notice he is becoming more fearful or less friendly toward visitors.

Just as we take steps to prevent health problems, we should consistently and proactively take steps to prevent behavior problems. Sadly, many times a pet's behavior is only attended to when there's a problem, rather than making it a point to keep a pet behaviorally healthy.

If your dog is becoming increasingly intolerant of people at the door, you are finding 'accidents' from time to time where your cat hasn't hit the litterbox, your dog is becoming more frightened of thunder or other startling noises, or your pet isn't getting along as well with other animals, then her behavioral health is deteriorating.

It's not a good idea to wait and see if things will get better, or make excuses like "he just must be having a bad day", or "it takes him a while to warm up to strangers". These signs of changing behavior need attending to. Putting off taking action usually means the behavior is allowed to worsen, often making it more difficult to change.

Next time, we'll check Ashley's pads more frequently when we're hiking. And if you've seen changes in your pet's behaviors that concern you, don't put off dealing with them. Do something about them today.

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