

Can Doggie Prozac® Fix Most Behavior Problems?

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Quite frequently when we do behavioral consults with people we hear the refrain “But can’t you just give him a pill?”. The answer is no, a pill by itself usually won’t solve the problem. We would all like to have an easy fix to our problems whether they be a car that won’t start, a boss that doesn’t understand us or a dog that is barking like there is no tomorrow. The advertisements we see on television, in the newspapers and on billboards have led us to believe that there must be a pill for almost any human or animal ailment. This desire for a pill to fix all our ills has been termed “pharmacological optimism” by a friend of mine in human medicine.

Researchers in human and animal medicine truly have made vast strides in medications the last 60 years. There are now a large number of different drugs that can aid in a variety of human behavioral problems, from situational anxiety to psychosis. The field of psychopharmacology (the study of drug effects upon behavior) has only recently begun to look for medications helpful for animal behavior problems. There are medications that seem to be helpful for some animal behavior problems. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved two medications for dog problems. One that can help with separation anxiety and one that can help with canine cognitive dysfunction. Separation anxiety is a panic state that happens when dogs are separated from people or animals that they are closely attached to. Canine cognitive dysfunction involves behavioral impairments in old dogs. Other medications have been used with dogs for several years to help with other kinds of problems such as compulsive disorders, fears of things such as thunderstorms or fireworks and fighting among dogs. These drugs have not been approved by the FDA for these behavioral problems, and are “extra label” and “experimental”. They are safe for most animals when used as directed by the prescribing veterinarian, but their effectiveness has not been proven. There may be many more medications yet to be identified that may be helpful with canine behavior problems. We will undoubtedly continue to see progress in this area.

With rare exceptions, veterinary behaviorists never prescribe a medication for a behavior problem without also recommending behavior modification or changes to the environment. The reason is that the drugs by themselves rarely fix the problem. However, when combined with other treatments, the medications can be helpful. The same is true of many medications used to treat human behavior problems. The treatment of separation anxiety in dogs provides a good example. In one published study looking at the effectiveness of the medication in the treatment of the problem, the researchers found that the medication was only helpful when combined with a behavior modification plan.

Prozac® is one of the “extra label” drugs that have been used to help with some dog behavior problems. It is not universally helpful for all dog behavior problems. Nor is the drug universally helpful with all human behavior problems. There are some dog behavior problems for which no medications seem to be helpful, at least not at the present.

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