

## Fear Free 101

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The mission of the Fear Free movement is to “alleviate fear, anxiety, and stress in pets and to educate and inspire people that care for them” This is accomplished through education of veterinary staff, groomers and clients. We have found that by decreasing patient fear, anxiety and stress (FAS) that visits are less stressful for veterinary staff, clients and their pets.

It is important to share the techniques used to decrease (FAS) with clients so that they can appreciate the care we are taking, but also so that they can model our techniques when working with their pet at home. The primary techniques involved include: communication with clients, considerate approach when interacting with patients, and gentle control when needed.

Stress is a normal biologic response to familiar and unfamiliar situations. FAS is ongoing or maladaptive, problems can occur. Our goal is to learn how to manage patient FAS so that we don't have patients entering the maladaptive phase of stress, and making the visit easier for all of us.

FAS, like many biologic responses is not an all or nothing response, animals can exhibit mild. The goal of Fear Free is to try to keep the FAS at a non-existent to minimal level. To do this you need to recognize the various signs associated with FAS, and what can be done to not trigger these, and to help decrease the signs. As with pain, FAS is easier to avoid than to treat after the fact.

Each species will exhibit typical signs of stress. These may include a change in ear set, how and where the tail is held, and how the mouth is held. The start of FAS can begin as early as placement into the carrier, or the start of a car ride. Recognizing when the FAS starts allows us to intervene before the event has occurred. A personal plan should be developed for each patient, and recorded in their hospital record.

What signs of FAS do we typically see in dogs, in cats, in rabbits, in parrots? When assessing a patient, communicate with the owner what you are seeing, and what might be done to alleviate the signs being seen. It is also important to maintain communication between staff members through recording what was seen, what was done, and what worked or didn't work.

Owner buy in to Fear Free techniques is essential, as their pet will look to them to gauge their stress levels too. We need to address client and patient stress. We may also need to have clients administer pre-visit premedications (PVP) to ensure that the FAS level is as low as possible.

How can we effectively communicate with clients? Communicate with clients the signs you are looking for and what you are seeing, describe what can be done to address these changes, describe what you are going to do, and listen to any concerns that clients may have regarding what we are doing, and what their animals are experiencing.

Alleviating FAS starts at home, and for this we need the client's help. Do we need to develop a plan to make the car ride less stressful? Can we explain how to make the carrier a haven, and not a torture chamber? How can the use of pheromones help with travel and FAS?

Making sure that you understand body language associated with both FAS, but also a relaxed, happy animal is important for ensuring a fear free visit. Being able to read client body language is also important, I know, we don't treat people, but FAS can start with them, and be transmitted to their pets.

We can recognize which animal is relaxed and which is stressed, but can you actually identify the body language and posture changes that each type of animal is exhibiting? Let's look at the typical changes seen with both dogs and cats.

Considerate approach addresses how we approach an animal to minimize FAS. It starts with the clinic and examination room environment. If you're a typical cat in the clinic, and the exam room tech scruffs you, and stretches you out on the exam table, how do you think you're going to react? Most cats are firm believers that a good offense is the best defense. Imagine instead, that instead of being scruffed, you are allowed to sit in your carrier, under a towel while the top is removed? Which cat do you think is going to be more comfortable, and allow handling easier?

How about a wiggly dog in for a toe nail trim. You KNOW that this dog typically takes 3-4 people to pin it down to accomplish a nail trim. Do you think this is a considerate approach? What are the chances of this animal exhibiting FAS as soon as they enter the clinic? What can we do to help retrain this dog, and make toenail trims easier for the staff, the dog and the client.

Touch gradient is used to describe how to touch our canine and feline patients to minimize FAS. We start with a light touch in a non-triggering area. If a dog has come in with the complaint of an ear infection, we don't start our exam by grabbing the irritated, painful ear. We might start with our hands on the shoulder, and move back increasing the pressure of our touch during our complete PE. Once the animal is comfortable and relaxed, we may move up the body to the irritated ear, if the animal indicates pain, we may need to consider using sedation rather than just pushing the animal through it.

Our goal with touch gradients is to not startle or scare our patients, no grabbing, no pushing, to pinning them down. Move slowly, smoothly, and let the animal dictate how far and how fast you move.

By combining the areas of minimizing FAS, using considerate approach, and touch gradient, we can make our patients less stressful, and potentially increase the level of care we can offer, and the visits are not as stressful to the owners. We want to ensure that we are providing the best emotional and medical care possible, while ensuring that the staff is not physically or mentally stressed either.

