



## Canine behaviour medicine



Dr Lisa Radosta is one of only 100 veterinary behaviourists in North America; I sat down with her (virtually) to discuss behavioural medicine and the Fear Free™ movement.

“Behavioural medicine is veterinary psychiatry. Specialists must understand the physiology of the brain and body and how problems can affect behaviour. We also need to understand learning behaviour and behavioural modification.”

Lisa says that, after graduating as a vet, she knew she didn't want to go into primary care and surgery of any type was not for her. Having trained her horses and dogs since the age of 18, behavioural medicine was a natural fit. “I've been practising for 17 years; I've never tired of the field.

“It's very common for dogs to be fearful of vets and other handling. The challenge is for our profession to recognise it as a problem.”

A good example is the fairly common practice of taking the dog out the back, away from its owner, for a blood draw. “Business models

need to change. The bias is that the dog does better with the owner not there but that is often not the case. The blood draw may go quicker, but the dog may be deeply stressed by it.

“The outcome measurement should have several factors: did you get the blood and did you also observe and measure for stress?”

The reluctance by pet owners to medicate a pet is also very common. The assumption that the reluctance is purely financial is wrong. “We know that a decision to medicate may be based on personal experience. If you have taken anti-depressants successfully, you are more likely to accept behavioural medicines for your pet. If you've experienced negative side-effects with medications, you'll be less receptive to medicating your animal.

“I think what pet owners need to understand is that if there is a physical problem of any kind, it will likely shorten the pet's life. A sustained stress response puts a lot of pressure on the body. Medicines can help the pet live a less stressful life. They are not

zombies if we use the right dosages.

“With young dogs, I tell parents to expect to medicate the animal until about age three; then if they want to consider weaning off the drugs, we can do that. Behavioural modification plays a big part during this period. Neurochemically, however, these animals may still need help and a lifetime of medication may be needed for the pet to live a comfortable and happy life.”

Dr Radosta served on the advisory board for Fear Free™ before it was established in 2016. The initiative, based in North America, aims to prevent and alleviate fear, anxiety, and stress in pets by inspiring and educating the people who care for them. It provides online resources and education written by experts in their fields on emotional wellbeing, enrichment, and the reduction of fear, anxiety, and stress in pets with the goal of improving the experience of every human and pet involved.

Although she no longer serves on the advisory board, Dr Radosta

Monday-Friday 8:30am to 4:00pm

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### Dr Lisa's Top 5 recommendations for vets:

1. Use your continuing education time to learn about behavioural medications available in your area.
2. Pay for the education of your support team (vet nurses and other staff) so they recognise body language and signs of stress.
3. Trust your team.
4. Don't be afraid to prescribe immediately. Behaviour drugs treat a systemic disease, which is an amplified stress response. There are real physiological changes due to stress.
5. Food, food, food. Vet practices need a range of treats for their patients which are high value and vets should be feeding treats before and during procedures, not waiting until the end of the exam.

continues to advocate for veterinarians to become certified. "It's an incredible and cost-effective opportunity to learn and to have access to continuing education and a library of resource materials which grows every year."

Fear Free™ recommends that certified practitioners promote their certification status to build trust in the profession with the promise of a high standard of care. 🐾

Dr Lisa is available through her website at [drlisaradosta.com](http://drlisaradosta.com)  
To learn more about Fear Free, visit [fearfreepets.com](http://fearfreepets.com)

### Dr Lisa's Top 5 recommendations for dog owners:

1. Your dog's anxiety is not your fault, but it is your responsibility.
2. Advocate for your pet politely and draw a clear boundary; if you'd like your dog to be examined with you present, ask for it. If your on-lead dog is approached by off-lead dogs, ask the owners to call their dogs off.
3. Be prepared to spend extra time at the vet because Fear Free™ approaches can take more time.
4. You know your pet. If you think your pet is sick, painful or anxious, ask for an exam and diagnostics. If your pet has a preference for a certain vet, ask for them when making a booking.
5. Bring your own stuff to the vet. "One of my best clients arrives with the dog's donut bed, peanut butter, special treats and a food toy. She's prepared to manage the stress of the visit." Dr Radosta also says that if you are bringing your children to the vet, be sure to bring toys to keep them occupied.