

HOW A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH CAN IMPROVE ANIMAL WELFARE AND RELIEVE WORKPLACE STRESS

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Veterinary medicine has always been a high-pressure field, and there is no doubt that this past year has created an even faster-paced environment. Between the wave of companion animal adoptions during COVID-19, the influx of new patients needing care, changing rules around animal monitoring, and an ever-growing labour shortage in the sector, there is a constant need for quick decision making. Slowing down may seem counterintuitive, but new research by the Vancouver Humane Society and a professor from Dalhousie University indicates that devoting a little more time to each case can actually save time and reduce stress in the long term.

When acting quickly, our human nature leads us to make assumptions as a shortcut to understanding a situation. Imagine that a client displaying anxious behaviours and wearing worn casual clothing brings in a long-haired cat with matted fur. For many people, the first assumption would be that the cat is neglected. However, that first reaction, the assumption, can be rooted in socially ingrained attitudes of prejudice and oppression. When we challenge our assumptions, we can gain a better understanding of the context that will lead to better long-term outcomes. Speaking with the client may reveal a host of circumstances beyond their control. Perhaps they are living on a low income with disability assistance; they took on this cat from a relative who could no longer care for her; they love the cat and are doing their best, but their chronic pain makes pet care difficult; they do not have the resources to take the cat to a groomer and are feeling overwhelmed and guilty.

Taking the time to understand the client's situation can turn their feelings of shame and guilt into a productive conversation, and the long-term impacts of that client's positive experience can be transformative. Clients who feel heard and respected are more likely to bring their companion animal in for care sooner, allowing a veterinarian to intervene when the animal is expressing subtle signs of being in need rather than when the situation has reached a crisis point. Seeing an animal when an issue first occurs or for preventive care can reduce the need for more aggressive, stressful, and costly treatments. It may also decrease the likelihood of a financially related euthanasia.

Some guardians face barriers to accessing veterinary care. Systemic barriers such as oppression and discrimination can place people at an increased risk of financial hardship. Hardship can also arise unexpectedly, so that people who could previously afford gold standard care for their pet experience difficulties after for instance, the loss of a job, an injury or illness, the loss of a family member, or a natural disaster.

A 2021 research article titled "Barriers to Care in Veterinary Services: Lessons Learned from Low-Income Pet Guardians' Experiences at Private Clinics and Hospitals during COVID-19" found that limited access to financial support created a major barrier to accessing veterinary care. One participant said she could not access urgent care for her animal in distress because she could not pay an \$800 deposit. The perception of a lack of financial support can contribute to an animal guardian's stress in what may already be a high-pressure emergency situation. As one participant summed up, "I still have the fear if you can't pay for the bill, they may ask you to surrender the

animal, and I didn't want to surrender the animal. I can feed her. She's loved." Many participants shared the fear that they would be encouraged to surrender their animal if they could not afford treatment—and indeed, this fear is backed up by statistics. Financial difficulties are one of the top five reasons cats and dogs are surrendered to shelters. When asked what factors would have helped them access veterinary care for their companion animals, those interviewed offered several possible accommodations. Cost-related suggestions included payment plans and compassionate pricing.

The guardians also pointed out that a change in perspective could improve the interactions between veterinary staff and low-income pet guardians. A conversational approach that recognizes the strengths of resilience, resourcefulness, and compassion in low-income people can make a difference in the outcome. One interviewee shared, "People who live in poverty or are low income are more willing to rescue animals . . . People who are poor will take on animals that have health problems or . . . have special needs, [and] help take care of them because of [their] level of compassion." Recognizing these acts of compassion is a trauma-informed practice that can help the client feel valued and provide a strong foundation on which to build a productive interaction.

The trauma-informed approach is already used in social services and health care to improve client and patient outcomes. In essence, the approach aims to provide more relevant care in the present by considering each person's context and past, specifically, their trauma. Traumas can make certain words and events triggering. People who have been placed at risk by structural and systemic barriers and discriminations related to poverty, (dis)ability, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, or a myriad of other factors are more likely to have various traumas in their lives, including a history of negative experiences accessing services from organizations or businesses.

Traumatic experiences can affect a person's sense of safety, confidence in decision making, and ability to regulate emotions and navigate relationships. It is also common for those who have trauma to feel fear, shame, helplessness, and powerlessness. According to the Klinik Community Health Care Centre, a trauma-informed approach considers the person and their needs holistically and "recognize[s] that the core of any service is genuine, authentic and compassionate relationships." Other authors define trauma-informed care as an approach

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based in safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness, and empowerment. In practice, these principles can present as creating welcoming spaces, providing clear messages, involving the client in decision making, and maintaining respectful boundaries—many procedures you may already incorporate into your model of care.

Past traumas in accessing services and financial barriers have resulted in many low-income pet guardians avoiding accessing veterinary care for long periods of time. This can particularly affect access to preventive care. A study titled "Access to Veterinary Care: Barriers, Current Practices, and Public Policy" found that more than one in four respondents, who were disproportionately low income, experienced barriers to veterinary care for at least one of their pets in the recent past. These guardians may need a bit of extra time devoted to listening to their concerns and setting their minds at ease about benign conditions. Responding to their specific needs and involving them in the decision-making process, including decisions around preventive care, can encourage them to value and prioritize veterinary care in the future.

By stepping back to challenge assumptions and collaborate with a client through a trauma-informed approach, veterinarians can empower their clients to make informed decisions about their animals' health. In turn, the improved access to care for low-income pet guardians can make sure that animals' needs are met, avoid preventable health emergencies and euthanasia, and improve the experiences of animal guardians and veterinary staff.

SIX STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TODAY FOR A TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

- 1. Build from your client's strengths by pointing to what they're doing right.** Take time to listen without judgment to the issues the client is concerned about and show appreciation for the thought and care the client has put into caring for their pet.
- 2. Make your client an active part of the decision-making process** by explaining the pros and cons of each treatment option along the spectrum of care. This includes quality low-cost options as well as higher-cost options.
- 3. Explain procedures and next steps in simple, accessible language.** If your client will need to monitor or provide follow-up care at home, ask them if they would like written instructions.
- 4. Make information about fees easily accessible,** either through signage or verbally during the appointment.
- 5. Get familiar with options for financial assistance for veterinary care in your area.** Create a "resource centre" in your waiting room with materials from local organizations that offer free and low-cost services for both animals and humans.
- 6. Engage in trauma-informed training opportunities.** The Vancouver Humane Society offers a free course on implementing a culturally safe and trauma-informed approach in the animal services sector. Register at vancouverhumane.ca/training.

VETERINARY AND OUTREACH ASSISTANCE SERVICES IN BC

Spay/Neuter Programs

Low-cost spay/neuter resources around the province: spca.bc.ca/programs-services/community-work/low-income-spayneuter-programs

Balfour's Friends Foundation

Veterinary assistance in Victoria and Vancouver Island. Veterinary clinic must apply: balfoursfriends.com/contact-us/veterinary-clinic-request; balfoursfriendsfoundation@gmail.com

BC SPCA

Charlie's Pet Food bank in Vancouver provides assistance with food and pet care supplies to people who are living in SRO, homeless, or registered with Charlie's: spca.bc.ca/programs-services/community-work/charlies

Veterinary assistance and low-cost vaccinations in Kamloops and area: www.kamloopsclinic.ca/services; 250.376.6055

Veterinary assistance and low-cost vaccinations in Prince George and area: www.pgclinic.ca; 250.562.5556

Food-related assistance around the province, inquire at the call centre: 855.622.7722

Emergency boarding resources around the province, inquire at the call centre: 855.622.7722

Elderdog

Assisting senior dog guardians with varied needs province-wide: www.elderdog.ca/Contact.aspx

Hugabull

Veterinary assistance province-wide; veterinary costs and dog spaying and neutering; food-related assistance: www.hugabull.com/reach-program; hugabullreach@gmail.com

In Memory of Maggie May

Veterinary assistance province-wide: inmemoryofmaggieamay.ca/criteria; maggieamay99@telus.net

Langley Animal Protection Society

Veterinary assistance in Langley and the Fraser Valley: www.lapsbc.ca/about-us/special-programs/majors-legacy-fund

Nana Foundation

Veterinary assistance on Vancouver Island: 250.477.2062

New Westminster Animal Services

Veterinary assistance in New Westminster: www.newwestcity.ca/animal-services; 604.519.2008

Paws for Hope

Veterinary assistance in Vancouver, Surrey, Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Maple Ridge: www.pawsforhope.org/what-we-do/better-together; 778.991.7729

Emergency boarding in Metro Vancouver, the Fraser Valley, and North and West Vancouver: www.pawsforhope.org/what-we-do/no-pet-left-behind; 604.506.9297

Veterinary assistance for women in shelters with pets in Metro Vancouver, the Fraser Valley, and North and West Vancouver: www.pawsforhope.org/what-we-do/no-pet-left-behind; 604.506.9297

Pets Matter Foster Care Society

Emergency boarding in the Lower Mainland: www.petsmatter.org/whatweddo.html; 604.945.9048

Prince George Humane Society

Cat behaviour resources: www.pghumanesociety.ca/programs; kelsey@pghumanesociety.ca

Royal City Humane Society

Veterinary assistance in New Westminster: www.rchs.bc.ca; 604.524.6447

Surrey Cat Coalition


Food-related assistance for cats in Surrey: www.surreycats.ca/programs

Vancouver Humane Society

Veterinary assistance for emergency, illness, or injuries, province-wide: vancouverhumaneociety.bc.ca/vet-assist; 604.336.1390

Veterinary assistance for women seeking secure housing, including spaying and neutering, vaccination, and deworming: vancouverhumaneociety.bc.ca/helping-women-and-pets-in-crisis-application-form; 604.336.1390

VOCAL: Voice of Concern for Animal Life

Veterinary assistance on Vancouver Island: vocalvictoria.com; 250.479.8418 or 250.598.1758 

To save space, the references are made available on the Chapter's website at www.canadianveterinarians.net/documents/west-coast-veterinarian-spring2022-list-of-references.pdf.