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FOUR QUESTIONS to ask to understand your pet

Whether you've just adopted a dog or cat, or lived with one for years, there may come a day when your beloved pet starts exhibiting some strange new behaviours that leave you baffled. To help demystify your pet's behaviours and understand what actions you can take, ask yourself these four questions.

1. Has there been a change in the environment?

Any change in the environment may contribute to new behaviours or behaviour problems. For example, the weeks or months following an adoption can be stressful for your pet as she adjusts to her new home. As well, the addition of a new pet or family member (spouse, baby), loss of a pet or family member, moving, and schedule changes can have a dramatic impact on behaviour.

2. Is there an underlying medical problem?

Often new behaviours are really the result of a health issue or prescribed medication. For example, bladder infections or kidney disease may cause your cat to eliminate outside his litter box if he comes to associate the box with painful urination, or if he has an increased urgency to urinate. As well, a frequent side effect in dogs using steroids is increased thirst. By drinking more your dog will likely need to go outside to relieve himself more frequently. If he's not let out more often he may have accidents inside the house. Some behaviours are a result of a combination of health and environmental changes. For example, any condition that leads to an increase in discomfort or pain can lead to increased anxiety, irritability or fear of being approached or handled. If you're not sure, visit a veterinarian to rule out medical problems.

3. Can you stop the behaviour by managing the environment?

Many problems can be resolved by teaching alternative behaviours, for example, teaching your dog to sit to greet people rather than to jump. But if you aren't committed to training, managing your pet's environment may be the solution for you. Don't want your cat sleeping on your bed? Close the door. Don't want your dog chewing your shoes? Keep them in the closet when not in use. Don't want your dog chasing the cat whenever he gets a whim? Create a "dog-free zone" in your house where your dog isn't able to enter and your cat can go to relax.

4. Are you encouraging the behaviour?

Throughout your pet's life he will continue to offer you new behaviours. How you respond will often determine whether or not the behaviour gets repeated. Consider that every time your pet's actions result in unpleasant consequences, such as lack of attention, the chances of your pet repeating the behaviour decrease. Every time your pet's actions result in pleasant (rewarding) consequences, such as attention or food, the chances of your pet repeating the behaviour increase.

To stop an undesired behaviour from being repeated it's important to determine what consequence(s) of the behaviour your pet finds rewarding. For example, if your dog greets you at the door by jumping up and you respond by giving your dog a pat, pushing him off, telling him he's cute or gruffly saying "off," you've likely rewarded the behaviour and increased the chance he'll repeat it. The reason: jumping is generally an attention seeking behaviour. Therefore the next time your dog starts to jump turn away from your dog and stand silently like a tree - withdrawing all attention until all four paws are on the floor. If your dog no longer receives any positive consequences for jumping the behaviour should start to decrease in frequency.

Special note: Keep in mind that when you stop rewarding a behaviour that is well established your pet's behaviour will likely get worse before it gets better. This is known as an "extinction burst." It is simply your pet testing to see if variations of his behaviour can make the "reward" appear once more. Be patient and consistent (this applies to everyone in contact with your pet!) and the behaviour should start to decrease in frequency. This may take as little as a couple days or weeks (or more) depending on how long you've rewarded the behaviour and how consistent you are at preventing future rewards.

Happily, many behaviours have a simple solution. If you're unsure about what is causing the behaviour, or how to respond, speak with an animal behaviourist, positive dog trainer (a trainer that uses positive reinforcement and not fear and punishment) or veterinarian for help.