

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER DISPLAYED IN COMPANION ANIMALS

I AM watching a nervous animal: she appears to be anxious, constantly fussing and continually checking what is going on around her as we prepare to go for a walk together.

She is displaying a range of potentially addictive behaviours, including ritualistic and repetitive thoughts and actions. The diagnosis for her condition is obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). I am not referring to a canine patient; this sufferer is my sister. She is the first to acknowledge she has the condition, and freely admits that irrational behaviour has governed all of her adult life.

One of the more acceptable obsessive behaviours she displays represents her way of dealing with stress. This treatment comes from the fact that

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discusses why pets appear to suffer from the same psychological conditions as their owners

she actually enjoys ironing, one of a number of household chores that is known among human psychologists to act as a stress buster for OCD sufferers. When my sister is performing the repeated action of sliding her iron across clothes, she is calm. This is because her brain becomes preoccupied by the therapeutic action known as stereotypical behaviour.

Near to the ironing board sits her 12-year-old male Yorkshire terrier dog, which represents another of her stress busters.

However, there is a downside

to this relationship. In response to all the extra attention and stroking the dog is given, he constantly licks my sister's arms and hands. She likes to stroke the dog, which is not surprising, as petting a living teddy bear is known to lower human blood pressure and heart rate. It is why Pets As Therapy (PAT) dogs are welcomed in hospitals, hospices and homes, and are part of a worldwide group that uses them in animal-assisted therapy.

The dog frequently performs this licking behaviour on my sister's other dog – an elderly Rottweiler – in a social behaviour known as allogrooming. It has exhibited this type of behaviour, alongside constant attention-seeking, since the loss of my sister's Yorkshire terrier bitch. The two were inseparable until her death, and like all females, this terrier was in charge and he misses her leadership. To deal with this loss he began grooming himself obsessively and compulsively until sleep would take over.

Human OCD

In human terms, OCD is known to be underdiagnosed and is thought to affect approximately

Below and inset: separation-related disorder can present in the form of destructive behaviour or toileting in the home.



Terrier exhibiting excessive licking behaviour.

two per cent of the population. It is believed that males and females are equally affected.

Although symptoms of the condition typically begin during the teenage years or early adulthood – when there are obvious stress factors for some individuals

– children are known to develop the condition at earlier ages, even during their preschool years. Research indicates that

at least one third of OCD cases seen in adults are presented in childhood.

The personality of the patient may also be important: perfectionists seem to be more prone to developing OCD-related behaviours.

All the major causes of stress in humans are, comparatively, the same as those that cause stress in pets. In people terms, they involve any

significant life change, such as moving college, school or work, moving house, the loss of a family member, partner or companion animal, a breakdown in a personal relationship, and any trauma or illness and injury that leads to intrusive surgery.

Any person suffering from long-term stress is extremely vulnerable, not only to psychological problems, but also physical problems. When a person is in a depressed mental state the immune system can also

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Presentations of obsessive and compulsive animal behaviour

CANINE

Repetitive or stereotypical behaviours include repeated circling, tail chasing, excessive grooming (licking), shadow or light pattern-chasing, circling patterns, moving from side to side repeatedly, air gulping, continual door scratching and obsessive chewing – symptoms of a neural imbalance and some degree of obsessive and compulsive disorder.

The onset of ritualistic-type behaviour indicates that one or more stress factors is being experienced. A dog that displays any daily repetitive behaviour may direct its attention in a hyperactive or aggressive manner towards associated targets, such as shadows, reflective lights and sounds – including telephone rings or door bells.

Canine obsessive-compulsive behaviour (COCB) can be directed towards frequently encountered targets, such as moving cars, bicycles or joggers as movement triggers the reaction. Repeated exposure acts to reinforce the disorder because the behaviour is driven by adrenaline and rewarded by serotonin and dopamine hormones.

Target-related COCB is commonly encountered in anxious dogs, and

there appears to be a predisposition in collies and collie crossbreeds. However, the behaviour has also been diagnosed in other working breeds, including Labradors, retrievers, terriers and German shepherds. Once the fixation or condition and the association develops, a dog can be triggered into exhibiting a wide range of behaviours, such as flight and panic, hyperactivity, chasing, digging, licking, barking, hiding under furniture and running away to collapse, destructiveness and inappropriate urination and defecation.

FELINE

Feline excessive licking has its aetiology in normal cat grooming behaviour that develops into feline obsessive-compulsive disorder (FOCD) following an emotional or physical trauma or ongoing excessive competition between home or neighbouring cats.

When excessive licking and grooming becomes highly repetitive it quickly transforms into stereotypical behaviour, which calms or soothes the cat (self-reward) by the repetitive action.

The cat is also temporarily rewarded by naturally occurring hormones or reward chemicals (serotonin) trig-

gered by the stereotypical behaviour. This reward aspect leads to the cat obtaining relief each time grooming or licking reaches a climactic stage. The behaviour becomes obsessive and compulsive once it has become habitual or occurs daily.

FOCD behaviour is almost certainly a reaction to emotional difficulties and stress factors that cannot be overcome in the animal's perception. Cats repetitively lick injuries or groom their flanks, paws or back when faced with emotional difficulties caused by territorial insecurity, inter-specific conflict, stress or fear-based situations and trauma.

AVIAN

Excessive feather plucking in birds has its roots in normal grooming behaviour that develops into avian obsessive-compulsive disorder (AOCD). The behaviour is usually triggered by illness, change in ownership or unsuitable environment – including inadequate caging, inadequate diet and impoverished social interaction. It can also be triggered by emotional or physical trauma or ongoing excessive competition between other birds.

When excessive grooming in companion birds becomes obsessive it quickly transforms into stereotypical behaviour (refer to examples for dogs and cats) because the pet is calmed by the repetitive action. Birds groom or preen their chest, wings or side repetitively when exposed to emotional difficulties, inter-specific conflict, stress or fear-based situation and trauma.

EQUINE

Equine obsessive and compulsive behaviour is seen in horses or ponies that have been repeatedly sold on. They form strong attachments with previous owners or other horses, and can be observed to react anxiously when isolated in a stable or field, and then respond as the owner or horse-friendly people approach them.

Once continuous contact ends, and as soon as owner attention, such as feeding, grooming or cleaning out ceases and they are left alone, equine obsessive-compulsive disorder (EOCD) episodes may commence.

Horses and ponies with the condition begin to weave from side to side in a stereotypical or repetitive motion, which can be observed from distance



Repetitive actions include stable door chewing.

– both in the field and in the stable environment.

Obsessive and compulsive behaviour is displayed in repetitive actions, which can be exhibited as head swaying or weaving, tail flicking, stable door chewing, wall kicking or furious floor digging. These behaviours can be quickly reinforced at the foal or young horse stage, because the display will usually result in a reaction from the owner.

The behaviour is inadvertently encouraged by an owner's attention, which includes a range of responses, such as laughter, praise, shouting, eye contact and physical attention.