



Animal Ethics and Well-Being with Dr. Frank McMillan

Frank McMillan DVM

What Best Friends is studying and why

I'm often asked about the studies we're doing here at Best Friends on the mental health and emotional well-being of animals. Since I'm the one who is heading up these studies, I thought I would use this column to answer the following frequently asked questions.

Why are you studying animals?

The mental health and emotional well-being of animals is every bit as important (if not more so) as the animals' physical health and well-being. Animals can suffer emotionally, they can experience psychological trauma from stressful events, and, just like people, they often need help to overcome their emotional pain. These sufferings don't just impair the animals' ability to enjoy life, they all too often cause the animals to behave in ways that their human caregivers disapprove of (destructiveness from separation anxiety, for example). Because of this, many of these emotionally troubled animals are given up to shelters, or euthanized.

By studying the mental health and emotional well-being of animals who have endured hardship, adversity and overwhelming stress of all types, we hope to gain an understanding of psychological trauma — how to protect animals from it, how to help animals develop emotional strength and resilience in the face of the stresses of today's world, and how to best treat the trauma survivors in order to give these unfortunate animals the ability to enjoy life.

Do your studies harm any animals?

Our studies, to use a particularly apt cliché, wouldn't hurt a fly. All of the studies are strictly observational in nature and cause the animals no disturbance or harm. The animals

involved in the studies are receiving all the help they need, and we are simply making careful observations about how they are behaving, how they're progressing in their therapy and what types of therapy bring about the fastest improvement in the animals' lives. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the animals

we are studying — over 99 percent — are people's pets, living in their own homes. Our information comes from people answering questions about their own pets, via an online questionnaire. The pet doesn't even know he or she is being studied!

What are you studying?

We have several studies currently in process. The largest one — involving more than 1,100 dogs — is studying the psychological effects of having been used as a breeding dog in commercial breeding operations (puppy mills). These dogs have been rescued from their ordeal and are now trying to enjoy normal lives. It's not easy for many of them — the psychological scars can run deep — and our study is helping us to find the best ways to rehabilitate these dogs.

Another study is looking at cats and the psychological and emotional effects of being held, quite literally, as prisoners in a terrible hoarding situation in Nevada. These cats, many of whom were at one time loved pets in people's homes, were all being kept in close confinement in a brutal desert environment with no medical care and



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Ask the Vet with Dr. Michael Dix, Best Friends Medical Director

Q: *Do my pets need variety in their diets?*

A: It depends. What will your pets eat? Some pets revolt if their food is changed, and they won't eat at all. Cats can get liver disease if they go more than a few days without eating. On the flip side, some animals will stop eating what they have been eating just because they seem tired of the food. Keep in mind, though, that most animals do not have the same relationship to food that we humans do. One of my dogs acts like dinner is the most exciting thing, even though we have fed him the same stuff for months. To him, the meal is exciting, not what's in it.

Animals who have allergies to certain foods should be fed the same thing every day. And I don't think it's a good idea to feed unique protein-source diets (such as venison, rabbit or whitefish) to a pet unless prescribed by a vet. Those foods are hypoallergenic because the animal has not been exposed to them before, not because of some inherent quality of those protein sources. An animal can become allergic to any food.

Another consideration is the cost of the food. If what you're feeding your pets is affordable and they seem to like it, I would not recommend changing diets. If you do change your pets' food, it's best to do it gradually. When the old brand of food is about to run out, mix what's left with the new brand of food for a couple of days. This will decrease the chance of the diet change causing diarrhea or vomiting.



Got a question for Dr. Mike? E-mail editor@bestfriends.org and put "Ask the Vet" in the subject line. For timely medical advice, please consult your veterinarian.

very little sustenance. A third study is investigating the psychological characteristics of dogs who have been abused. This study will help us understand the psychological effects of abuse to help us develop the best ways to rehabilitate and emotionally heal these brave survivors.

Our other studies are looking at pet store puppies, the rehabilitation of dogs rescued from fighting rings, the emotional bonding of dogs to their people, dogs' fears, and ways to best measure and improve quality of life in emotionally troubled animals.

How can I participate in your studies?

We announce our studies and ask for participants in a notice posted in this magazine (in this issue, it is on page 68). If you have a pet who has a history of the particular psychological issue we're studying, simply contact me, and I'll tell you how to get to the questionnaire for the study.

I wouldn't want to send my pet to Best Friends. Can I participate while keeping my pet at home?

Yes! None of the studies require that animals come to Best Friends, or even leave their home at all.

I participated in one of your studies. Will I be able to see the results?

Absolutely. All of the findings will be made public. We intend to publish the results of most of the studies in scientific journals, while also providing useful summaries of the results to you, the nonscientist animal lover, in general publications like this magazine and on our website.

How can I support the work you're doing?

Donations are greatly appreciated and allow us to carry out more studies about more mental health issues, which will help make more unhappy animals able to finally experience some happiness.

If you would like to contribute, please contact Carragh Glover at (435) 644-2001, ext. 4802, or e-mail carragh@bestfriends.org. And if you have any questions about our work, please call me at (435) 644-2001, ext. 4470, or e-mail me at dr.frank@bestfriends.org. 🐾

Dr. Frank McMillan is the director of well-being studies at Best Friends and is currently studying psychological trauma in animals.