

## **Behavioural Case Study – Sound Sensitivity**

**Patient "Noodles"** " - 7 year old, female neutered terrier cross (Jack Russell x Border Terrier).

**Main Complaint** Anxiety arising from traffic noise, thus making walks extremely difficult.

**Background Noodles** is a lovely, sociable dog who used to very much enjoy her daily walks. Two years ago, whilst walking with her owner along the seafront, a lifeboat released some flares which created a very loud noise. Noodles became very distressed and reacted by trying to run away and hide. This triggered a pattern of fearful behaviour, whereby she has been scared of loud noises and crowded areas. Over the last six months this reaction pattern has worsened and her owners are unable to walk her anywhere where she will encounter traffic noise.

The particular behaviours Noodles displays in the presence of the loud noise are freezing, crouching and trying to escape. She displays these behaviours regardless of who is walking her.

**Analysis** It is important that we attempt to diagnose accurately the cause of Noodle's behaviour. Top of our list of possible causes was true fear to the sound, but we had to eliminate other possible explanations for the behaviour, for example attention seeking behaviour, pain/medical condition or cognitive dysfunction.

### ***Attention seeking behaviour***

Sometimes dogs may have a fearful reaction to a trigger (like fireworks) and when they receive comfort and reassurance from a person, they learn that this is a way to get attention from that person. In these cases, the behaviour is only exhibited when in the company of that particular person and the dog will cease the behaviour when the trigger stops. This is attention seeking behaviour.

In comparison, in a true fear response, the behaviour occurs regardless of who the animal is with and continues for a period of time after the triggering event has ceased. This is because the trigger produces a physiological response of the body (sweating, drooling, etc.) as well as a psychological response (fear) and so the body needs time to recover.

We ascertained that Noodles was showing a true fear response.

### ***Pain or medical cause***

A sudden behaviour change can sometimes be related to a medical condition. In addition, certain conditions or pain can exacerbate existing behavioural problems.

On examination, we found Noodles to be healthy but she did demonstrate mild pain when we manipulated her hips. We decided that, as the fear behaviour had begun two years ago, the pain was likely to be a confounding factor rather than a cause

### ***Canine cognitive dysfunction***

This is a very complex disease which is diagnosed by a process of elimination. It is generally considered a disease of older animals but has been diagnosed in dogs as young as seven. Symptoms can include disorientation, altered sleep behaviour and house soiling. Noodles did not show any other changes consistent with cognitive dysfunction.

**Diagnosis** We diagnosed a fear of loud noises, with pain a potential contributing factor.

### **Treatment**

#### 1. Medication:

We gave Noodles pain relieving drugs for two weeks to assess her response.

We also gave her a drug called Zylkene. This is a natural product that is used to help control anxiety and reduce stress. Reducing anxiety and stress will make Noodle more receptive to training as she will be better able to focus and learn.

#### 2. Reducing the expression of the behaviour:

This involves a process of avoiding the triggering cause and then gradual reintroduction.

In addition, we try to give Noodles positive experiences on walks by taking her to places she likes.

#### 3. Environmental enrichment and mental stimulation

Because of the behaviour problem, Noodles was inevitably having less exercise than she needed as she was taken for fewer walks. To compensate, knowing she enjoyed sniffing, we prepared games where food was scattered around and hidden so she would have to use her sense of smell to find it. These games gave her mental stimulation and required a lot of concentration which tired her out.

Steps 1-3 are aimed at reducing Noodle's stress levels and increasing her confidence.

#### 4. Desensitisation and habituation to loud noises

The next step was to desensitise her to the loud noises. This was done by playing a recording of the sounds of which Noodles was afraid, at the same time as giving her something she enjoys, such as food or a toy. This must be done very carefully and at a pace set by the dog, or it can cause a worsening of the fear. It is imperative to start with very low volumes of sound. The initial sound was just loud enough to be audible to Noodles and was gradually increased as she became more comfortable with it. We carefully monitored Noodle's reaction, aiming for her simply to indicate that she could hear the noise, for example by lifting her head or moving her ears, before going back to her toy.

Please do not attempt this technique without the advice of a qualified behaviourist.

#### **Follow up**

Noodle responded very well to the treatment. Her levels of stress reduced with the Zylkene and the training has worked wonderfully well. Noodles is not currently on any pain medications. Her young family realised that she is more confident when they have their child's pushchair out with them on walks. This is because she uses it as a safe space if she does not feel comfortable in a situation.

Noodle and her family are now able to enjoy their walks once more.