

CASE STUDY: IS MY PET PARROT HAPPY?

QUESTION: Is she free to express normal behaviour?

ANSWER: We let her out of her cage a lot and she's got lots of toys. I need to check that the toys are actually useful though, and don't just seem like good fun to me! I give her food in a bowl, but she could probably express more normal food-finding behaviour if I put some food between the cage bars, or if I used a puzzle feeder.

ACTION: I'll discuss her cage and toys with the vet. I could also talk to a reputable breeder about a possible companion for her, but I'll have to think carefully about the commitment before doing this.

QUESTION: Is she free from discomfort?

ANSWER: I've not really thought about that before. I've heard that natural branches can be better for a parrot's feet than the smooth perches she's got, and sometimes we smoke near her cage, which she doesn't like. I think we spray her with water often enough.

ACTION: We won't smoke in the same room as her cage. I'll ask about perches when she goes to the vet for her check-up.

Get the idea? Have a think about the way you keep your pets, following this method and using your veterinary practice for advice. If you do this, your pet should have everything it needs, you'll stay within the new laws, and hopefully everyone, including your pet, will be happy!

The BVA Animal Welfare Foundation is the veterinary profession's charity committed to improving the welfare of animals through veterinary science, education and debate. The Foundation is funded entirely by voluntary contributions. To make a donation please visit www.bva-awf.org.uk or call us on 020 7636 6541

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What makes my pet happy?



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HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHETHER YOUR PET IS HAPPY?

Most pet owners will probably immediately answer 'yes', but how can you be sure that your pet is happy? What signs are you using to tell you that he or she is? Pets are kept all over the world, and are often loved by their owners and considered as one of the family. In many cases this love leads to good treatment – but what about a dog that's on its own all day while its owners are out at work? Or a budgie alone in a cage? Are these pets happy? Do they have good welfare, or a good quality of life?

ANIMAL FEELINGS

Happiness, welfare and quality of life are all talking about how animals *feel*. This can seem very difficult to know for sure; animals can't, after all, tell us how they're feeling.

Fortunately, however, there are now ways of using scientific methods to check that our pets are happy. In many cases we'll probably find that they are, but in some cases we may find that they're not. What's important is that we at least check. This leaflet will give some information on how we can approach this important subject.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'HAPPY'?

How an animal is feeling (its welfare) can range from good to bad, with lots of

possibilities in between. When welfare is very bad, we say that an animal is suffering. When welfare is very good, we might say that an animal is happy. Somewhere in between, we might say that an animal is content, which is when it has everything it needs. If we can give our pets more than this, for example, giving a dog a longer walk than it actually needs without harming its health, then great, we can probably make it even more happy. But making sure our pets are content and have what they need is what's most important.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO KNOW IF OUR PETS ARE HAPPY AND CONTENT?

Well, to most people this is hopefully obvious: because we want them to be! But it's also important because new animal welfare legislation (The Animal Welfare Act) introduces something called 'a duty of care'. This means that we must, by law, not only prevent our pets from suffering, but we must provide them with the things they need to make them happy and content. This is good news for our pets!

THINKING OF EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS – THE FIVE FREEDOMS

The first thing to do is try to think of all the things that can affect whether our pets are happy or not. A useful framework for this is the 'Five Freedoms', which is used by



governments and animal welfare organisations (see box right). Good welfare depends on good *physical* and *mental* health, and the Five Freedoms include both of these aspects.

The Five Freedoms make sure that we think of all the things that can affect how animals feel. For example, it's not good to be well fed but in pain, or to feel safe but too cold.

WHAT DOES 'FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NORMAL BEHAVIOUR' MEAN?

Four of the five freedoms are easy to understand, but what do we mean by 'freedom to express normal behaviour'?

Even though most of our pets are domesticated, and have been born in captivity, they still need to perform some of the behaviour that they would have done if they were born in the wild. Some types of behaviour are so important to animals that if they can't perform them they will suffer. These behaviours are called 'behavioural needs'. Exactly *which* behaviours are important to animals depends on the species of animal (rabbits have different behavioural needs from parrots, for example), but science is being used to find out what these behaviours are. A human example might be social behaviour, that is, the need to have contact with other humans.

THE FIVE FREEDOMS

1. FREEDOM FROM HUNGER AND THIRST
2. FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY AND DISEASE
3. FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT (eg, TEMPERATURE, FLOOR SURFACES)
4. FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NORMAL BEHAVIOUR
5. FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS

If you spent your entire life without a chance to meet or speak to anybody would you be happy? So 'freedom to express normal behaviour' means 'able to meet behavioural needs'.

HOW DO I KNOW WHAT MY PET'S BEHAVIOURAL NEEDS ARE?

Your vet can give you information about which behaviours are important to different types of pets. The Government is also producing 'Codes of Practice' booklets to accompany the new laws. Your vet will be able to tell you where you can get copies of the booklets, or where you can view them online.



HOW CAN YOUR VETERINARY PRACTICE HELP?

Vets and veterinary nurses are trained in many aspects of animal welfare, and have lots of practical experience with animals. Thinking about the Five Freedoms again, they work to achieve 'freedom from pain, injury and disease' on a daily basis, and regularly advise on living environments (to achieve freedom from discomfort and freedom to express normal behaviour) and diet (to achieve freedom from hunger and thirst).

WHAT CAN I, AS A PET-OWNER, DO?

- Assess your own pet's quality of life by using the Five Freedoms like a tick-list.
- If you think that you aren't achieving one or more of the Five Freedoms, change the way you keep or look after your pet so that you can achieve them.
- If you're not sure whether you're achieving the Five Freedoms, or you're not sure how to make changes for the better, ask your veterinary practice for help.

We have lots of other useful information for pet-owners on our website:

www.bva-awf.org.uk

CASE STUDY: IS MY PET PARROT HAPPY?

Use the Five Freedoms to help you answer. Answer 'yes' to all five, and she's probably happy and content!

QUESTION: Is she free from hunger and thirst?

ANSWER: I don't think she's hungry, but I feed her lots of sunflower seeds. I've heard that these are very fatty and low in vitamins.

ACTION: I'll check what's best for her at my veterinary practice.

QUESTION: Is she free from pain, injury and disease?

ANSWER: As far as I know. But she hasn't had a check-up with the vet recently and her food might be bad for her.

ACTION: I'll book an appointment.

QUESTION: Is she free from fear and distress?

ANSWER: Yes. She used to be scared of the dog, but they get on fine together now. Nothing else scares or upsets her.

ACTION: No action required.