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Modifying components for OCD.

Common compulsive behaviors.

Five key components to most successful OCD modification programs:

1. Increase exercise.

A useful part of almost any behavior modification program, exercise relieves stress and tires your dog so he has less energy to practice his OCD behavior.

While physical exercise is hugely important, don't overlook the value of mental exercise for relieving stress and tiring a dog mentally.

(See "A Puzzling Activity," June 2008, and "Mind Games," October 2004, for more information on how to keep dogs busy.)

2. Reduce stress.

This is an important and obvious step, given that OCDs are triggered

and exacerbated by stress.

You will need to identify as many stressors as possible in your dog's life. Have the whole family participate in making a list of all the things you can identify that causes stress for your dog - not just the one(s) that appear to trigger the obsessive behavior.

Fetchaholics.

Many of us have "fetchaholics" – dogs who seem "obsessed" with fetching & develop a variety of demand-behaviors designed to get people to play fetch with them.

This behavior is different from a true OCD behavior. First, because it's in context (in the case, the presence of the ball).

Also, it can be turned off, even if it's difficult to do so.

The behavior really is under the dog's control.

Shock collar.

Then go down the list identifying any you can simply eliminate (i.e., shock collar for that evil underground shock fence) and commit to removing those from his environment.

Next, mark those that might be appropriate for counter-conditioning.

Manage the dog's environment.

Finally, try to manage his environment to at least reduce his exposure to those that can't be eliminated or modified.

3. Remove reinforcement

All too often, owners mistakenly think obsessive behaviors are cute or funny.

They reinforce the behavior with laughter and attention, and may even trigger the behavior deliberately, unaware of the harm they're doing.

When the behavior becomes so persistent that it's annoying, the dog may be reinforced with "negative attention" when the owner yells at him to stop doing it.

4. Reinforce an incompatible behavior.

When the tail chasing puppy is not chasing their tail is the time for high rate of reinforcement for calm behavior, especially for the dog to lay quietly on their bed.

Also, look for other calm behaviors to reinforce during otherwise potentially stimulating moments, such as sitting quietly at the door for their leash rather than leaping about in excitement over the pending walk.

5. Explore behavior modification drugs if/when appropriate.

With persistent and well-practiced OCDs, referral to a qualified veterinary behaviorist for consideration of pharmaceutical intervention is nearly always imperative.

The selection, prescription, and monitoring of the strong, potentially harmful psychotropic drugs used for modification of difficult behaviors requires the education and skill of a licensed veterinary professional.

If some of this information has alarmed you - good!

Obsessive-compulsive disorders are alarming.

If your dog, or a friend's, is showing early signs of OCD behavior, we want you to take it seriously, and intervene immediately, in order to prevent the behavior from developing into a debilitating disorder.

If your dog already has a severe obsessive compulsive behavior, do something about it now, find solutions for difficult behaviors and make the commitment to find the help you need so you and your dog can have a full and happy life together.