

JULY 2019

# INSIGHT

COMPANION ANIMAL EDITION

*JULY IS DIGITAL IMAGING MONTH!*

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# WE'RE ALL DRUG ADDICTS

## UNDERSTANDING THE BIOCHEMISTRY OF THE UPSET CLIENT

Why do people love sports teams? Camaraderie in a crowd? That “all in” mentality? Being part of something bigger than yourself? Here’s another question: why do people find comfort with family and friends? Acceptance? Love? Perhaps it’s reassuring familiarity? Here’s a final question that greatly affects our livelihood: why do people love their pets?

The answer to all three of these questions is both simpler and more complex than you might think: we’re wired this way! Our biochemistry drives these and many other behaviors. We will delve more deeply to understand both the evolution of human biochemistry and what motivates behavior. We will also identify positive and negative biochemicals in the

body that drive behavior as well as actions you can take with clients to increase positive chemicals and reduce negative ones.

We all know that veterinary medicine is an emotional profession, and it can provide us with much happiness and gratification. Isn’t our cause of helping animals a noble one? Doesn’t that



*Body language, even in a still picture, can cause an emotional reaction in the viewer.*

bring deep satisfaction in and of itself? But what if we help animals *and* their families? In that way, we generate even deeper levels of self-fulfillment by treating the patient *and* supporting the client. While the client is not ill herself, she is still dealing with a range of emotions that release chemicals in her body that have identifiable, physiologic effects. As a result, your client is inherently biochemically wired to react to, interpret, and dictate behavior.

Where did this start? Humankind's evolutionary success is principally due to our large cerebral cortex – responsible for language, memories and thinking. It stores life experiences by building neuropathways based on past occurrences and habits. These neuropathways are connected to each other via neurotransmitters, and once pathways are connected, like a walkway tracked through deep snow, they become easier to follow. That's why you don't easily forget how to ride a bike; even after a long absence from bike riding, the pathways are still there to be followed.

In contrast, the limbic brain processes sensory input. It is comprised of the amygdala, hippocampus and hypothalamus, all of which regulate and deregulate neurochemicals, influenced by the individual's past history and experience. In other words, the limbic system provides an emotional interpretation of a particular stimulus for the brain. Concurrently, the cerebellum and brainstem are responsible for controlling routine body functions necessary for survival.

Prey animals, such as gazelle and mice, use their limbic system for flight. They don't think or plan nearly as much as lions or people do, but they are better equipped to react quickly. In contrast, predatory creatures are able to plan and plot because of the higher thought processes available to them via their larger cerebral cortexes.

With our larger cerebral cortex, capable of accumulating a vast amount of knowledge over time, humans should be well equipped to make good decisions, right? So why is it that we sometimes don't? Well, when push comes to shove, our behavior is less motivated by higher thinking and more by what will help keep us alive – things like social acceptance or status, companionship, love for our family, friends and pets, as well as fear and avoidance. Biochemicals, including dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, cortisol, adrenaline, and endorphins, make us feel content or angry, sad or happy, scared or safe, and help ensure our survival and the propagation of our genes.

See below for a quick and dirty breakdown of which biochemicals do what.

### PLEASURE CHEMICALS

- ◆ **Oxytocin:** responsible for feelings of family, love, companionship, and social alliance
- ◆ **Dopamine:** brings about pleasure, euphoria and anticipated reward
- ◆ **Serotonin:** high levels lead to feelings of importance and pride, while low levels contribute to depression

While everything that makes us feel good is not essential to survival (and may even be contrary to it), in general, pleasure chemicals are used by the brain to reinforce behaviors that propagate the species: achieving social approval, eating high-calorie foods, cooperating with others, having sex.

### STRESS CHEMICALS

- ◆ **Cortisol:** leads to feelings of anxiety, fearfulness, tightening of the chest, and increased blood pressure
- ◆ **Adrenaline:** participates in “fight or flight” response to situations that may be dangerous

These biochemicals, while they may have a negative connotation, are just as vital as the pleasure chemicals to our survival. They make us fearful and reluctant, as well as prepare us for fight or flight. If one is motivated by pressure or stress, these chemicals can actually be helpful, but for the 73% of people who are uncomfortable speaking to a group, high cortisol levels can exacerbate the stress so severely as to inhibit performance.

So, which biochemicals are your clients experiencing on a day-to-day basis? The short answer is – all of them! They are bonding with their pets via oxytocin, but when the pet develops a problem, cortisol comes rushing in. If the issue is an urgent one, adrenaline may also play a role. Even before entering the hospital, clients are in a stressed state. Other concerns – financial worries, emotional misgivings, and physical apprehension – send the client's limbic brain into overdrive.

*Continued*

And yet, most of our clients love us! Why? The answer is still biochemical. When we help their pets, we help reduce their cortisol. Clients bond with us via their pet, and this gives them oxytocin release. These bonded clients write positive reviews and thank-you notes, and give gifts. These are the clients that make our jobs wonderful and easy to do.

We all have clients, however, who are not happy with the service we provide. The upset client's limbic system starts in overdrive, too. Cortisol is released, but by the time you realize she is upset, the negative chemicals are in full force. The cerebral cortex, the thinking part of the brain, may even make up a story to support the stressed condition – an altered reality, if you will. “You’re trying to take advantage of me” is not an uncommon refrain from our clients, even though we know nothing could be further from the truth. Once the cortisol starts circulating, the cerebral cortex looks for reasons to stay in that groove, and the client will look for even more reasons to be mad – a missed phone call, lost collar, or delayed discharge time.

Now, how do you proceed with the upset client? Try to bring them back to reality. Ask, “Why do you think we’re trying to take advantage of you?” Remind the client that your team is trying to help their family and their pet. Aim to find similarities and common ground on which you can agree. Remember that your goal is to create that surge of oxytocin. You may not be able to lift an upset client out of that



biochemical rut, but sometimes you can. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, however, because it's easier to create oxytocin before the client moves too far down that cortisol highway.

What can we do to promote our clients' happy chemicals from the beginning? From day one, build and promote relationships between your clients and your clinic's team, from janitorial staff to client liaisons to veterinarians. Find common interests, whether they be pets, kids, or hobbies. Communicate with clients frequently: send text updates, make follow-up phone calls, and send images of their furry family member they can share with friends and family. Oxytocin and serotonin are released every time they view a photo or post it to social media. Then make sure to repeat doses of the happy chemicals as often as you can. Our bodies are wired to release pleasure chemicals for only short periods of time, so clients (and your staff!) need frequent surges of happy chemicals.

When trouble brews, be straightforward and honest about addressing cortisol and adrenaline as soon as they're released. Encourage positive biochemicals by becoming part of the pet's inner circle and provide frequent doses of oxytocin and serotonin via positive interactions on a regular basis. Remember that you always have two aims: healing the pet and supporting the client. You already know how to read signs and symptoms in the former; it's worth your time to decode the client's chemical status as well. ■

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