

# Behavioural problems in pets

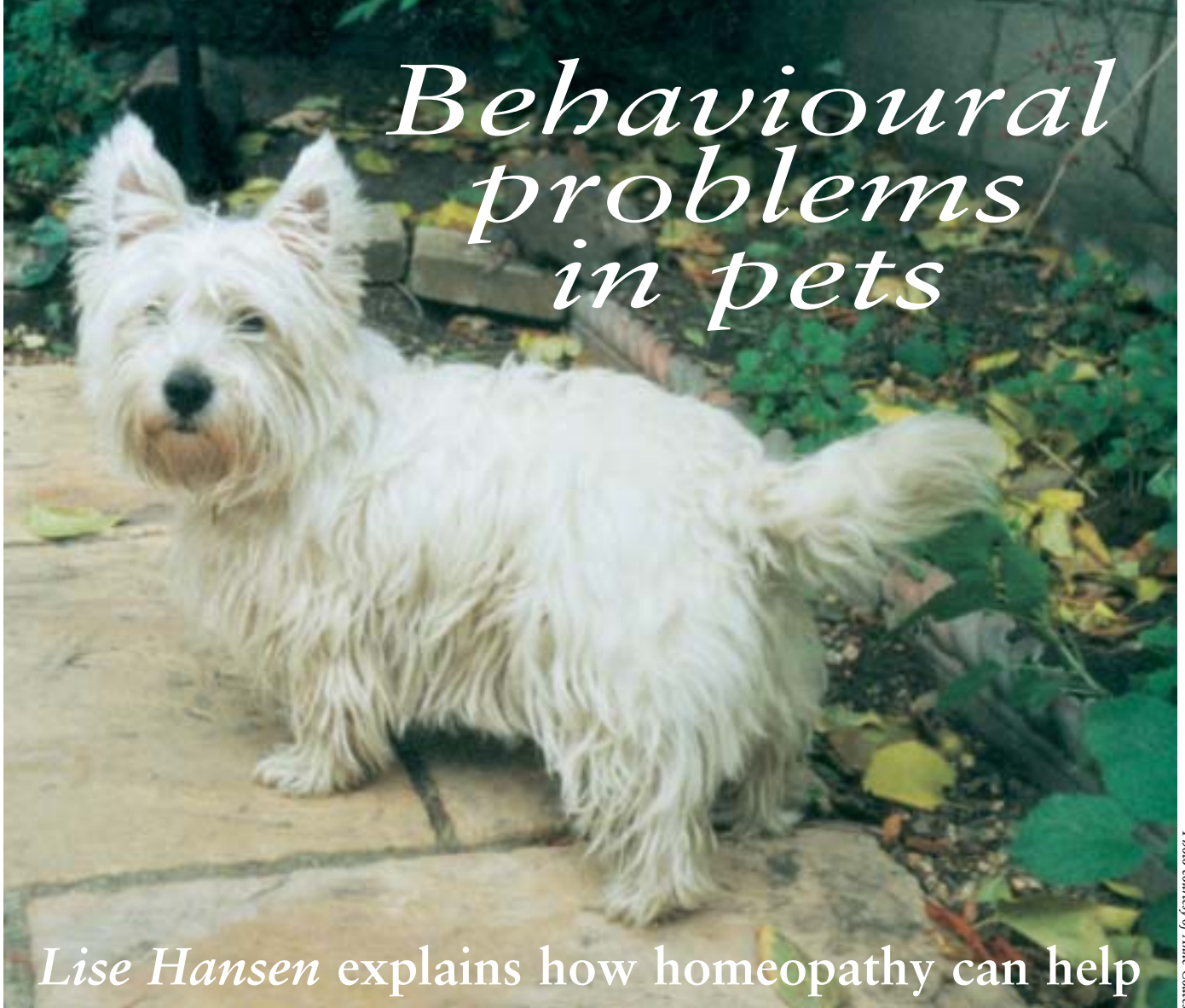


Photo courtesy of Anne Coates

*Lise Hansen* explains how homeopathy can help

There are currently an estimated 15 million dogs and cats living in British homes. The majority of these animals are much loved pets, increasingly treated as equal members of the family and, as we all know, capable of hugely enriching the lives of their human owners.

Sometimes, however, the picture is not quite so idyllic. It is a sad reflection of this that one of the most common reasons for an animal to be brought to the vet to be put to sleep is behavioural problems: we kill almost as many healthy dogs and cats because they cannot adapt to the lives we expect them to live, as we euthanise ill, suffering or old animals. This is clearly a huge problem which manifests in

many different ways and for many different reasons. We could be talking about dominant and uncontrollable dogs, fearful dogs that may become aggressive, dogs that become destructive or howl if left alone, cats that defecate in the house, the list is very long indeed. The list of possible reasons for these problems is equally long. Sometimes what we perceive as inappropriate behaviour is actually completely normal behaviour for the species in question, the human lifestyle we try to squeeze them into being the real problem. Inexperienced owners may choose an inappropriate breed for their circumstances, fail to socialise them at a young age or to offer sufficient exercise and stimulation. Problematic

traits may be created through in-breeding. Physical disease or emotional trauma can also result in behavioural changes.

I am not an animal behaviourist but as a vet and a homeopath I work within the area of animal behaviour both when examining the behaviour of a physically ill patient requiring homeopathic treatment and in cases where an animal is brought to me specifically for homeopathic treatment of problematic behaviour.

Understanding the patient's character and behaviour is at the core of classical homeopathic prescribing. It will often be the subtle and seemingly irrelevant changes in behaviour that point to the curative remedy even in serious physical disease. Physically

healthy animals are brought to me for homeopathic treatment of a wide range of behavioural problems. Sometimes the best approach is careful education of the owner, possibly combined with a referral to an animal behaviourist. In a few sad cases of potentially dangerous animals, the only responsible action is to recommend euthanasia or the handing over of the animal to a more experienced handler. In most cases, though, homeopathy can play an important role in solving distressing and frustrating conflict between animals and their humans. Most cases of serious behavioural problems need professional, individualised treatment. However, there are some common problems that are often easily treated and that may be solved without the need to visit a veterinary homeopath. Below are a few examples that you may recognise.

### *Holiday stress*

If you know from past experience that your pet tends to pine, refuse food or suffer from bouts of physical illness whenever you go on holiday without them, there are several steps you can take to ease their stress. If your pet has been going into a kennel or cattery, consider looking for someone who will care for them in your own home. This can be a friend staying in your home or someone coming in twice daily to check on your pet, feed them and provide exercise and human company. This arrangement is often much less stressful, certainly for cats and in many cases also for dogs, who may cope much better with your absence if they can be in their home environment. Finally, giving a dose of Ignatia 30c

when you start packing, then leaving the remedy with the carer to give a few more doses in your absence, can make a big difference, especially in the animal that is noticeably distressed, restlessly pacing, whining and looking for their owner.

### *Anger and resentment*

Some dogs and cats appear to be managing just fine during your absence but seem deeply affected and indeed affronted and disinclined to forgive you once you return home. Many owners can testify to a distinct cold shoulder when they return to greet their pet. A surprisingly common manifestation of this reaction is the cat that starts going to the toilet in very inappropriate places, often choosing their unfaithful human's clothing or bed as a good place to express themselves. The most commonly listed homeopathic remedy for "resentment" is Staphysagria, and I must say that I can think of very few cases of cats behaving in this manner as a reaction to being abandoned by their owners (even if only for a weekend) where Staphysagria wasn't the curative remedy. If the cat in your life seems to be saying "How dare you leave me?" try giving a daily dose of Staphysagria 200c for two to three days immediately on your return, or, if you know from past experience that the problem starts while you are away, give one dose prior to departing and get whoever is looking after your cat to repeat it a couple of times while you are away.

### *The re-homed animal*

For some animals the hurt of being abandoned goes much deeper and requires more individual treatment and

attention. I am referring to the many dogs and cats that are rescued or re-homed every year. While it is certainly a thoughtful and worthwhile gesture to offer a home to a homeless adult animal rather than a cute and innocent eight-week old puppy, I would never recommend this as an option to inexperienced pet owners. These often very traumatised animals are much more likely to suffer both from behavioural issues and from physical disease. In my experience the latter often manifests as chronic allergic skin conditions or recurring urinary infections. It is worth noticing that these patients are generally very responsive to individualised homeopathic treatment. Below is an example of how stress resulting from past trauma can continue to cause problems several years after re-homing.

### *From monster to pussycat*

Ben was a very angry and traumatised adult cat. His current owner had taken him on from a cat charity a couple of years previously. At the time they had been told that this was Ben's last chance. He had already been returned to the charity three times as his various new owners quickly realised that they had taken on more than they could handle. If he were returned again, he would be put to sleep. Apparently his last placement was with a woman who had called the police in a panic as she was afraid to leave her bedroom because she was under attack from a very vicious Ben!

Initially Ben's behaviour in his current home was equally dramatic. He decided that the hallway in the flat was his territory and he attacked anyone who tried to move from room to room through ➤

his hallway. Even several years later, Ben's owner could show me the scars arising from this period as he recalled with a shudder how he used to have to put on leather trousers and arm himself with a towel or a broom before he could contemplate fighting his way to the bathroom.

Ben was thin, unable to relax let alone play, constantly on edge and ready to strike. Slowly, however, Ben began to trust his new owner who, in spite of constant attacks, stuck by Ben, fed him and waited. When I first saw Ben, a few years later, he was very different. He no longer attacked people unprovoked. He could still draw blood if a friendly game with his owner got out of hand, but generally he was approachable, even affectionate most of the time. Unsurprisingly, Ben had a real reputation in the neighbourhood, where he would regularly beat up other cats. Indeed he himself carried the scars of many bloody battles. Most of them, I am sure, provoked by him.

Ben's owners came to me because of his recent habit of urine-spraying in the house. Unfortunately extensive travelling, sometimes for weeks at a time, had become an unavoidable part of Ben's owner's job. Ben was never left alone as there were always other members of the household staying with him. However he had started spraying indoors, initially only during and particularly after these periods of abandonment.

Increasingly, though, this behaviour had taken hold and Ben would now spray in the house nearly every day. Whenever he didn't get fed on time or didn't get let outside as soon as he demanded, he would vent his

anger by spraying on the new sofa right in front of his frustrated and long-suffering owners. It seems to me that having finally built up trust in a human being, Ben was still painfully sensitive to what I think he perceived as being let down and abandoned.

Based on a full analysis including many other features of his case, I prescribed Nux vomica. The effect was immediate. Ben didn't spray in the house at all for a few months. With time, the problem returned when his owner went away for too long, and we developed a system whereby Ben's family would administer a few doses of Nux vom if his favourite person was away for more than a week.

At subsequent visits, his owners would describe how he always reacted to the remedy by sleeping for one or two days as if he had been drugged, always a nice

confirmatory sign that the remedy has hit a "sore spot" and will go on to do good. During the initial treatment Ben's character changed dramatically as he let go of much of his past hurt. His owner once said to me that he had become so sweet and happy whereas before he was always "like a grumpy old man with a hangover and a headache" who may be nice to you as long as you do what suits him but still remains irritable and quick to lash out. A perfect description of Nux vom, often called the number one remedy for hangovers!

### *Professional help*

Many rescued animals settle down happily in their new homes and never present a problem – just as many animals that never suffer any obvious stress in their lives develop serious behavioural or physical health problems. Thankfully, homeopathy can help them all.

Animal owners can do much to alleviate common problems. However, the vast majority of behavioural problems will not be suitable for home treatment. Treating your own animal with homeopathic remedies based on general advice from one of the many books on the market, is most likely to have no effect at all – except perhaps challenge your belief in homeopathy. Trying out one remedy after another by simple working through a list of possible remedies can even have a detrimental effect on your animal. It is clearly important to seek the advice of a qualified veterinary homeopath. Individual treatment is the very essence of homeopathy. We are all unique individuals – humans, cats or dogs – and we should be treated as such.

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*Photo courtesy of Sande Hamilton*