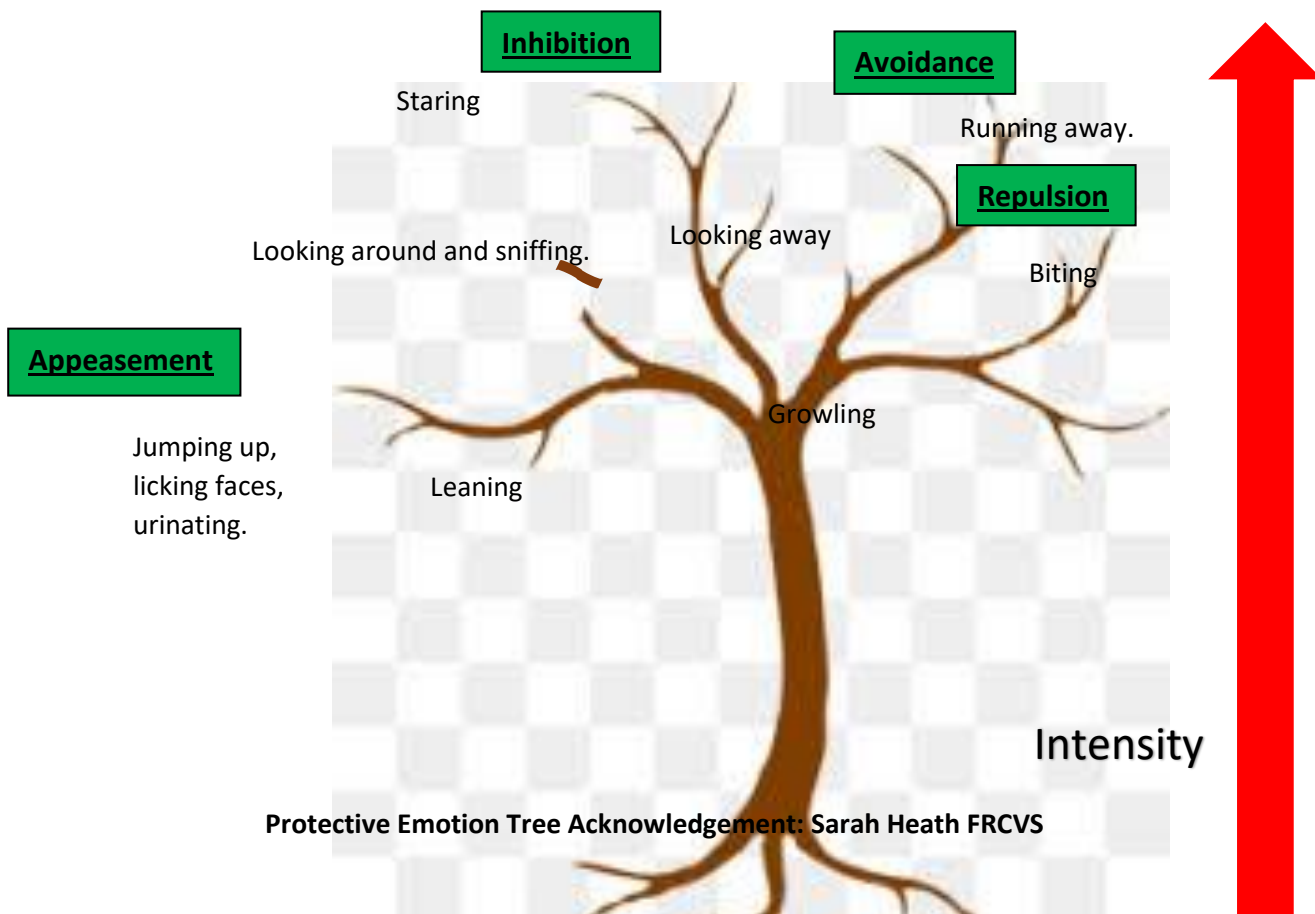


Canine and Feline Behavioural Responses

Using the Heath Model of Emotional Health, Dr Sarah Heath FRCVS outlines four types of behavioural responses displayed by pets when they are experiencing a “protective” emotion. These emotions include fear-anxiety and pain. The aim of the behavioural response to these emotions is for the animal to protect itself and feel emotionally, and physically, safe. This aim can be achieved in different ways through the four different responses. In the Heath Model of Emotional Health these are appeasement, inhibition, avoidance, and repulsion. It is important as a dog or cat caregiver that you know how to recognise their responses and behaviours in order to prevent undesired situations. With each type of behavioural response they have different levels of intensity. Dr Heath created an analogy “The Protective Emotion Tree” to help us to better understand emotions. Think of a tree with four main branches, one for each type of response. As you go up the branch, the intensity of responses increases.



The Four Behavioural Responses

Appeasement - This is where individuals **actively** try and exchange information by gathering and offering, during interactions with other pets or their caregivers. The purpose of this behaviour is to find out more about a situation that they are finding difficult in order to make themselves and the other party feel more comfortable. When gathering information from other dogs you may see them smelling or licking, particularly around the face or the back end, to encourage scent signals to be produced from glands within the skin. Yes, this is why dogs sniff each other's bottoms. To us this is abhorrent, but to dogs it is completely normal. If dogs are discouraged from being able to do this, this can create feelings of frustration at not being able to gather the information they needed. Appeasement is not so commonly used as a behavioural response in cats. This is because they are not socially obligate animals, and they can find it safer to deal with problems on their own rather than enlist the help of others. Some cats do use appeasement and they can offer information to others remotely through behaviours such as depositing urine. They do not need to be in the same place as the other cat as they sniff the urine and gather the information, and this can make both cats feel safer.

Some dogs will do a lot of leaning and this is because they are gathering information from the dog/person they're leaning on via their muscle tension. This can also be seen as a head resting on you or when a dog nudges you. If this happens. Try very hard to relax the point of your body which they are leaning on so that the information they gather is that you are relaxed and happy.

Inhibition - Inhibition involves a more **passive** approach to gathering information. The information is gathered through the animal's senses, but they do not engage with the other party. For example, a dog may watch or stare from a distance or may sniff the air to gather information rather than directly sniff at the other animal or person. In its more intense form inhibition can lead to the animal being physically still and this can be misinterpreted as them being comfortable with the situation. We see this sometimes with patients in the veterinary practice who are very still in the consulting room and just let things happen to them without physically reacting. This response is protective and triggered by at least some degree of uncertainty. It is important to recognise it, because when protective behaviours are not successful animals will need to try out another branch on the tree and they may jump to the repulsion branch. This can result in an animal that was very still, and assumed to be ok, suddenly starting to bark or growl or even snap. If inhibition responses are shown, it is important to figure out the trigger and not proceed too much further with the situation without greater understanding of what is happening.

Repulsion - Rather than finding out more about something that is troubling them, pets who use repulsion are trying to get the trigger to stop and move away. This response is one we have most complaints about as it leads to the most undesired and sometimes upsetting behavioural responses. Repulsion can also result in behaviours which could cause injury. On the repulsion branch the low intensity can lead to behaviours such as a growl, baring of teeth or a hiss. Your pet will be doing this to try and remove whatever is causing them to be fearful or anxious. If growling/hissing isn't enough, the intensity will heighten and as they move up the repulsion branch they may bite, swipe or both for cats. Of course, the more intense responses have serious consequences which is why it is important as a caregiver to recognise the low intensity responses and try to avoid escalation. We can advise you on how to do this so please come and talk to us if you have seen any repulsion responses from your pet. With dogs it can be safer in some instances for a muzzle to be worn to prevent any injuries and we can help you choose the right sort of muzzle and introduce it appropriately to your pet.

Avoidance - This behavioural response has the same aim as repulsion in that the pet wants the trigger to stop but they achieve this by their own action by either moving away physically or not engaging with the trigger. At the low level of intensity avoidance behaviours can cause your dog

or cat to simply be looking away or avoiding eye contact. If this doesn't achieve the desired effect and reduce the pets feeling of being uncomfortable then the intensity of the reaction increases and they may run away or hide under a table. With this behavioural response it is strongly recommended to allow them to carry out the behaviour, so if they look away then try to think about what is causing this behaviour and if you are able to remove the trigger by changing the situation that is the best approach. If your dog runs off and hides under the table, allow them to do this and do not follow them. Give them time for the avoidance response to be successful in making them feel better and wait for them to want to re-engage. If triggers such as other animals or other people lead to an avoidance response do not force interaction as you may then find yourself in a situation when your dog or cat perceives avoidance to be unsuccessful and jumps to another branch, such as repulsion.

If you feel you need help or advice, if any of the above resonates then please get in touch and we will do what we can to help.

Laura Holderness, RVN