

PTSD In Animals

Today's podcast is about PTSD in animals

As I've mentioned a few times, I have a wonderful kitty by the name of Punkin who has feline PTSD.

A few months after adopting him in 2014, one morning out of the blue, he attacked our little American Eskimo dog, Dixie. She wasn't even looking at him when he suddenly attacked. My husband & I both hollered Punkin's name, which got his attention fast. He looked almost as if he woke up, then he looked at us & Dixie, then ran off & hid. Dixie was fine, but very shaken up. While consoling her, my husband & I talked about what happened, & I told him that the way Punkin looked reminded me of how I felt after a flashback. I learned that day that animals could develop PTSD. My husband & I have learned how to help Punkin & I wanted to share it for you other cat parents out there in case you too have a traumatized furbaby on your hands.

In all fairness, I'm not positive how the symptoms show up in other animals, but I believe they're rather similar. Our late chow chow dog, Bear, had been abused & once in a while he acted quite a bit like Punkin does. Looking back, I believe he had a slightly milder case of PTSD than Punkin has.

PTSD symptoms in cats are quite similar to humans. They have an extremely sensitive startle reflex, so they sometimes react inappropriately to situations. If they get scared, fight, flight or freeze instincts may take over. Punkin freezes - his pupils dilate & he won't move. They can be very anxious too, which means they may be skittish, hide or potty outside the litter box or have separation anxiety. They're hyper vigilant, always extremely aware of their surroundings. Getting angry easily can be another symptom, as can being depressed. Signs of depression can mean losing interest in things they normally enjoy such as food, playing or snuggles. They may have nightmares, which you can see by how they sleep. Most cats twitch a bit in their sleep, but a cat with PTSD will do so more often & violently. Another big clue is they avoid things that can be similar to the traumatic event. I believe due to how Punkin attacked Dixie his trauma was related to a dog. She was the only animal or person in our home he ever attacked. And yes, they have flashbacks. If you haven't seen someone have a flashback or if you don't have them, it can be hard to identify. When Punkin has had them, his eyes get huge & he's obviously terrified. He also acts completely out of character, like when he attacked Dixie, then suddenly stops. He sometimes hides afterwards, but he returns to normal in a few hours. They also make him very tired.

There are some ways to cope with PTSD that I have found to be pretty successful. I talk to Punkin. I tell him I understand since I have C-PTSD, & it stinks. It'll be ok, he's safe & surrounded by other cats & people who adore him.

I also follow his lead. Punkin is very loving, but not particularly snuggly. Sometimes when the PTSD flares up, he wants to be left alone & other times he wants me to hold him. I do whichever he wants.

When Punkin has bad days, I do my best to remain completely calm in his presence. Cats pick up on the energy of their humans, so if I'm calm, he'll be calmer. I never tell him "calm down". Instead, my energy says everything is fine, & there is nothing to be upset about.

Catnip is a life saver! I started giving it to him to try to help his anxiety levels. It didn't take him long to learn that it helps, so he goes to it often & voluntarily when his symptoms flare up. I got some very soft, fuzzy socks from the dollar store for this purpose. I put some catnip in a small rag, tie it up, & put it in the sock. Punkin also likes jingle bells so I have some with bells inside, some without. He picks whatever he likes as he needs his 'nip. Lemon balm is also an excellent, all natural alternative to catnip. I used to give Bear valerian root pills. The smell is very strong & it tastes pretty yukky, so it wasn't easy to get him to take it at first. It didn't take him long to realize that it helped though, so he began going to where I stored it to let me know when he needed some valerian.

Some pet parents also get tranquilizers for their pet from the vet or use other calming aids that are readily available at pet stores.

If you too have a pet with PTSD, following these steps really can help. I'm happy to say that Bear turned into a very loving, gentle dog from an aggressive one & Punkin's symptoms are managed very well. He rarely has flashbacks anymore, & his anxiety levels are much lower.

Thank you for listening to my podcast!