Attention has many definitions in the dictionary, including “the act of attending, care and thought, consideration”. Attention getting is defined as: attracting attention; conspicuous. Both these definitions apply to the role of attention in the human-pet relationship. Attention from people toward their pets and from the pet to the humans is the glue that holds the human-animal bond together. The cat that jumps on our lap, the tail wagging greeting when we return, the dog head on our knee all elicit a return response from owners. Since seeking attention is part and parcel of the pet-owner experience, how can it contribute to behavior problems and/or get out of hand?

In non-verbal species, attention-getting behaviors may serve to obtain or transmit information about the environment or the social situation. A dog may attempt to get an owners attention if it needs to be let outside to eliminate or to be fed. A cat may try to get noticed to be fed or obtain a clean litter box. These behaviors seem necessary and normal within the context described. If ignored when attempting to satisfy a biological need an animal may escalate its behavior in order to be noticed. Here too, it may seem logical and necessary yet at times these actions might become objectionable. If an animal must engage in prolonged and persistent attention getting behaviors to fulfill biological needs, the animal may learn that excessive displays get them noticed. This learned connection could lead to problem behavior in other contexts.

Attention seeking behaviors can also arise when the pet is faced with either an inconsistent environment or inconsistent interactions. In non-verbal relationships animals rely on certain cues in their environment and from the other species to aid in determining what is happening next and therefore how they should behave. Predictable environments and interactions are calming to humans and animals. Knowing what is going to happen next, or how to access certain things in the environment make life less stressful. If the relationship between action and outcome is unclear or when events are unreliable or unpredictable anxiety is a likely result. Anxiety can lead to behaviors which owners might find objectionable such as whining, pacing, digging, following, leaning, increased visual scanning and vigilance and other behaviors that attempt to get information about the environment and/or outcome. Not only are these behaviors a problem for the owners, anxiety causes problems for the pet as well. Chronic anxiety and stress can lead to health issues such as increased blood pressure, inhibition of inflammatory processes, and changes in immune function as well as changes in cortisol.

Animals may engage in attention seeking because it is not clear what the appropriate behavior should be. When an animal is nervous or anxious they may whine, nudge, paw at or interact with their owner in some way. If the owner responds with attention, the act the animal is engaging in will be reinforced. When faced with the same situation again, the pet is more likely to repeat successful behaviors than try something new and the behavior patterns become perpetuated. Keep in mind that behavior is defined by its outcome. If the outcome is perceived as positive for the pet, the behavior will be repeated. If the outcome is perceived as negative, the behavior most likely will decrease. Once a behavior pattern becomes established, it is more likely to be repeated in the future in similar situations.

At other times, because our companion animals are social, they may want the attention or play and feel that they are being ignored. The pet may resort to intense and persistent behaviors to get an owner response. Dogs may bark, lunge, steal objects, chase, and whine, paw at people and perhaps even use aggressive behaviors. Cats use different behaviors including crying, running, destruction, jumping onto inappropriate areas and even stealing. All of these behaviors invariably result in an owner response. Although the owner response may be a reprimand, the pet may still perceive it as attention. Depending on the intensity of the owners response, and the pets temperament even responses designed to be aversive may be perceived by the pet as positive and therefore reinforce the behavior and lead to its continuance. When this occurs it is possible for a vicious cycle of punishment and/or reprimands to take place and the pet-human relationships are in serious jeopardy. Another consequence of intense attention seeking behavior is that the owner will actually ignore the pet when they are calm and quiet which sets up an inappropriate contingency on behavior and consequences. When the animal is calm, it gets no attention. When the animal seeks attention in inappropriate ways it gets plenty of attention thereby virtually insuring that those behaviors will be repeated.

Attention seeking behaviors often occur concurrently with other behavioral disorders. Compulsive disorders, certain aggressive disorders, separation anxiety, thunderstorm phobias, and generalized anxiety usually have components of attention seeking which help maintain the behavior.
History Taking
The behavioral history and the actions of the pet and owner in the examination room will aid in the diagnosis of attention seeking. During the consultation the pet may repeatedly seek out the owner and may paw, whine, lean, jump up, bark or even nip at them for attention. If the owner responds even briefly by eye contact, touch or speaking to the pet, instead of calming the pet and resulting in a cessation of these behaviors, the attention seems to fuel the behavior to continue. When questioned, owners may also relate similar situations at home including phrases such as “I can never get any work done”, “My pet follows me everywhere even into the bathroom”, “He seems to never get enough love and attention”, “If I am not interacting with him he will take something and destroy it”. Dogs with attention seeking disorders seem unable to have enough interaction and often will not choose to go and rest quietly on their own. Not all dogs that seek attention from their owners or remain near them have problem attention seeking behaviors; however, if the behavior concerns the owner then it is noteworthy and deserves treatment.

Treatment
Treatment entails educating the owner about attention seeking behaviors, no longer reinforcing unwanted behaviors, restructuring the pet-owner relationship and creating a predictable, reliable environment that meets the physical and social needs of the pet.

Owner Education
Generally pet owners have a difficult time understanding how attending to their pet can result in problem behaviors. If the animal comes to them and solicits attention most owners will interact almost without thinking about any possible adverse consequences. While generally this is not a problem, if the requests for attention are persistent and the animal never is satiated, then the attention is not the answer. Helping owners understand how behaviors become perpetuated, how reinforcing anxious responses makes them more likely in the future is an important step in treatment. Often owners will state that they have “ignored” the pet before, but when the behavior persists, they give in and relent by attending to the pet. The owner needs to understand that rather than diminishing the behavior, the delay between the actions of the pet and response will generally strengthen the response since the relief at the outcome is so high. In other situations they have tried to talk to or reason with their pet. It is helpful to emphasize that pets are non-verbal and respond to what we do rather than what we say. The owner must also understand that what they want to ignore is the attention seeking behaviors, not the pet. Therefore, a complete treatment plan must not only include ways to eliminate the behavior, but outline clear and consistent rules for interactions.

Eliminating Unwanted Behaviors
The simplest method for eliminating unwanted behaviors is through the use of the behavioral technique of extinction. Behaviors are maintained by their consequences and the principle of extinction is to remove the positive reinforcement for the behavior so that is becomes less likely to occur in that situation in the future. When using extinction, all forms of positive reinforcement must be identified and eliminated which may be a daunting task. Some types of reinforcement are self-rewarding such as scratching on furniture, while in other situations persons outside the home or family members who will not participate in treatment undermine attempts to remove reinforcement. Finally, the owner themselves may in a moment of weakness give in and attend to the pet. Using extinction to eliminate a behavior often results in frustration and an escalation in the behavior before it declines which may result in the owner giving up the treatment plan.

Combining positive reinforcement for desirable behaviors with ignoring undesirable behaviors will often make an extinction program more effective. This might entail ignoring the dog when it paws for attention, but going over and petting it while it is lying quietly.

Since ignoring a pet is difficult to do, giving clear rules and setting reasonable expectations in the beginning can help owners continue with the treatment plan. For example, if the pet continuously solicits attention when the owner sits down to relax, initially the owner might be told to take a towel, place it on their lap and then ignore all attempts by the pet to solicit attention for the next 10-15 minutes. This accomplishes two goals. First, it allows the owner to have a finite amount of time in which they must ignore the attention seeking. Second, a towel on the lap will serve as a signal to the pet that no attention is forth coming and should help the pet distinguish when attention is available and when it is not. Gradually the owner is required to ignore the attention seeking behaviors of the pet for longer periods of time. Just as important however, is explaining to the owner when and how they can give their pet attention.
Restructuring the Pet–Owner Relationship

By the time an owner seeks intervention for a behavior problem and for attention seeking their frustration is quite high and their relationship with their pet is in jeopardy. The first step in restructuring the relationship is to create rules for interaction. While they are at times going to ignore the attention seeking behaviors, they must be able to interact with their pet at other times. The general rules for interaction are:

- In the beginning, all attention is initiated by the owner
- The pet can receive attention when it is calm and quiet
- The pet must earn attention by either performing a task such as “sit” or by remaining calm and quiet nearby
- The owner calls the pet over, begins the attention session and ends it before the pet does
- Initially the pet is required to “earn” all things. Later if the animal requests the item by calmly sitting and waiting it will be given.

Creating a Reliable, Predictable Environment

The owner should also strive to have a reliable and predictable environment for their pet. This should include regular feeding, play, walks, and grooming and interactive time. To the best of their ability the owner should strive to include these interactions in their daily routine and as close to the same time as possible. If the pet knows that a daily walk or playtime is forthcoming often they will wait for it and are satiated once it is complete. In addition, if the owner knows they have allotted time to the social and physical needs of their pet, they may find it easier to ignore attention-seeking behaviors at other times.

Follow-up and Prognosis

Follow-up is extremely important to insure success. Owners have a difficult time ignoring their pets and changing the way they relate to them. Weekly telephone follow up will help answer questions about the treatment plan, assess the frequency of attention seeking behaviors (i.e. their increase or decrease), allow for changes in the treatment plan and encourage the owner to continue. Once the behaviors begin to change, the follow up interval can be lengthened. If no change is seen, a return visit and re-evaluation is needed.

Most attention seeking behaviors respond well to treatment. However, if the owner returns to their previous behavior patterns, the attention seeking behaviors will return. If attention seeking is part of other behavioral disorders, concurrent therapy for those disorders is necessary. If attention seeking is part of severe anxiety disorders, compulsive disorders or separation anxiety medication may be indicated for those disorders.

References