

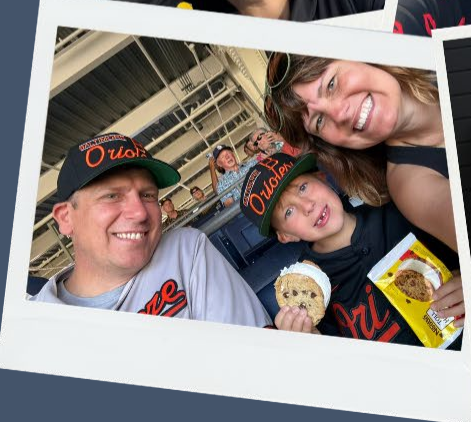
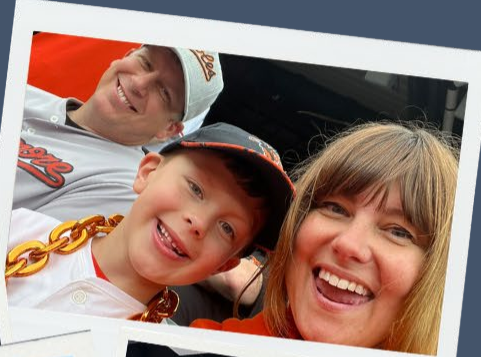
Claws Out:

Defusing Difficult Client Encounters

Evidence-based communication strategies for veterinary professionals

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THE RITZ-CARLTON®



BUSH VETERINARY
NEUROLOGY SERVICE



Welcome

50 minutes

Packed with real scenarios and practical takeaways

Who this is for

Everyone in your clinic – front desk to veterinarians

What this is NOT

A lecture on being nicer. It's about being smarter.

Participation

Encouraged – your experiences matter here

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- ✓ **Identify:** Recognize the root causes behind difficult client behaviors
- ✓ **Apply:** Use proven de-escalation techniques in real-time situations
- ✓ **Navigate:** Handle grief, anger, financial conflict, and demanding clients with confidence
- ✓ **Protect:** Set professional boundaries that preserve team wellbeing
- ✓ **Build:** Foster long-term trust even after a difficult interaction

Session Roadmap

01 Why Clients Become Difficult

02 The Toolkit: De-escalation in Practice

03 Client Type Playbook

04 Setting Limits & Protecting Your Team

05 Recovery & Building Long-Term Trust

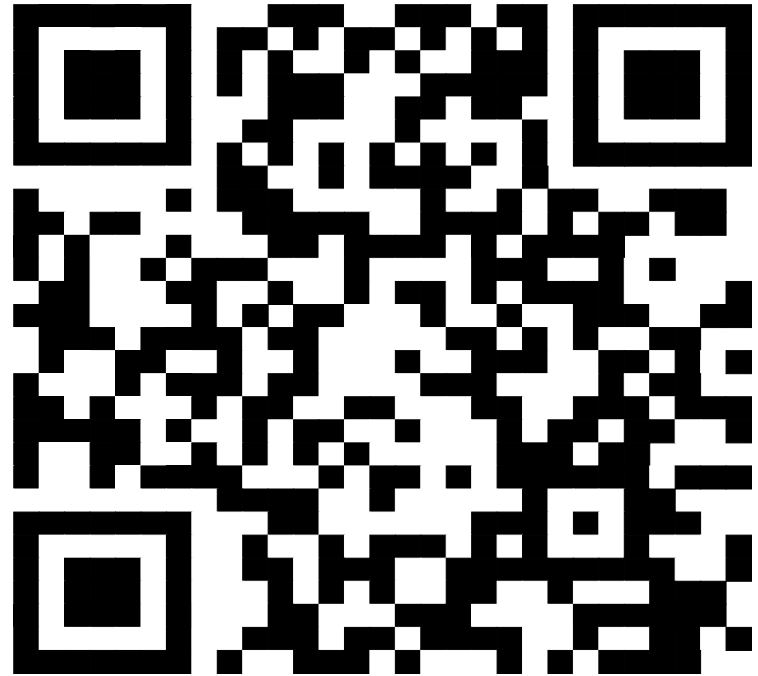
Why Clients Become Difficult

Understanding what's really happening on the other end of the leash

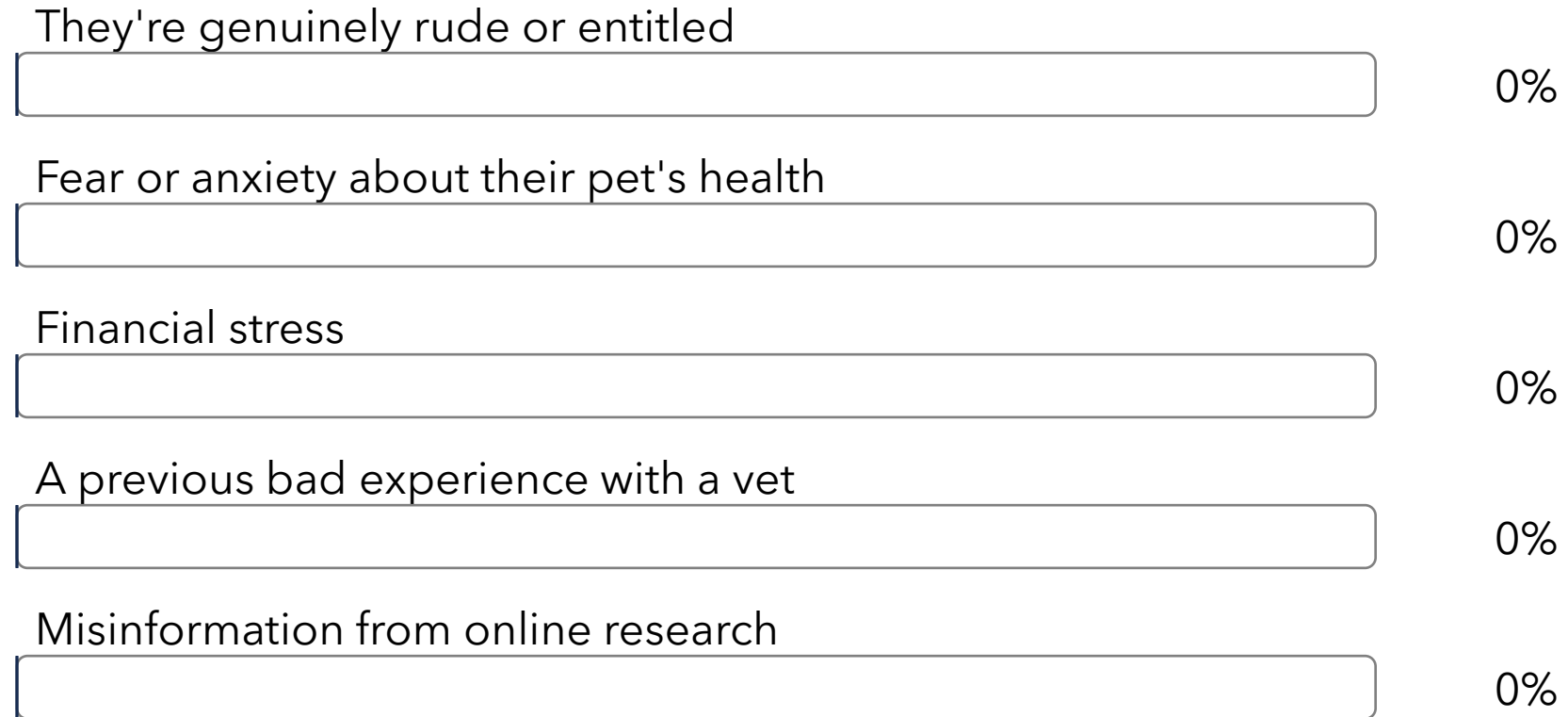
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Go to **vevox.app**

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In your experience, what is the most common underlying cause when a client becomes difficult?



They're genuinely rude or entitled



0%

Fear or anxiety about their pet's health



0%

Financial stress



0%

A previous bad experience with a vet



0%

Misinformation from online research



0%

RESULTS SLIDE

The Emotional Core

Most difficult behavior isn't about you – it's about them.



FEAR

Terrified their pet is suffering, dying, or being mistreated. Fear hijacks rational thought.



GRIEF

Anticipatory grief or active loss. Anger is often grief in disguise.



LOSS OF CONTROL

They can't fix this themselves. Helplessness converts to frustration – often directed at you.



DISTRUST

Past bad experiences, online misinformation, or financial anxiety erode trust before you say a word.

The Behavior Iceberg

ABOVE THE SURFACE – what you see

Yelling · Demands · Complaints
· Threats to leave

BELOW THE SURFACE – what's really driving it

- Fear of losing their companion animal
- Financial stress and shame
- Past trauma with veterinary care
- Feeling dismissed or unheard
- Sleep deprivation caring for a sick pet
- Information overload / Dr. Google anxiety



When you address the iceberg – not just the tip – behavior changes.

Think of a difficult client interaction you've had in the last month.
What do you think was underneath their behavior?

RESULTS SLIDE

The Toolkit: De-escalation in Practice

Concrete techniques that work – even when you're exhausted

Try to explain or give information to calm them down

0%

Listen without speaking until they finish

0%

Call a colleague or manager for backup

0%

Try to speed up the interaction to resolve it quickly

0%

Try to speed up the interaction to resolve

0%

Freeze – and just try to get through it

0%

Try to explain or give information to calm them down



0%

Listen without speaking until they finish



0%

Call a colleague or manager for backup



0%

Try to speed up the interaction to resolve it quickly



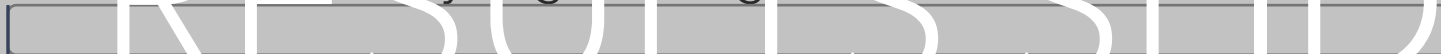
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Try to speed up the interaction to resolve



0%

Freeze - and just try to get through it



0%

RESULTS SLIDE

What is one word that describes how you feel after a difficult client interaction?

RESULTS SLIDE

The LEAP Framework

A four-step approach for any escalating interaction

L

Listen

Full attention. No interrupting. Let them exhaust the emotion first. Resist the urge to defend.

"Tell me more about what happened."

E

Empathize

Name the emotion without agreeing with the content. Validation ≠ agreement.

"I can see how frightening this must be for you."

A

Acknowledge

Repeat back key concerns to confirm you understood. This breaks the escalation cycle.

"So, your main concern is whether Max is in pain – is that right?"

P

Partner

Shift from adversarial to collaborative. Offer a concrete next step together.

"Here's what I'd like to do, and I want your input on it."

Words Matter: Swap This for That

AVOID THIS

"Calm down."

"That's not our policy."

"There's nothing more we can do."

"You should have brought them in sooner."

"I already told you..."

SAY THIS INSTEAD

"I want to make sure I understand your concern."

"Here's what I can do for you right now."

"Let's talk about what options we still have."

"I'm glad you're here now – let's focus on what we can do."

"Let me explain this a different way."

The 30-Second Reset

Before you re-enter a difficult situation, give yourself 30 seconds.

1

PAUSE

Step away from the door.
Even 10 feet is enough.

2

BREATHE

4 counts in – hold 4 – out
6. Activates your
parasympathetic system.

3

REFRAME

"They aren't angry at me.
They're scared for their
pet."

4

INTENTION

"I will listen first, respond
second."


Science says: Bringing your own stress level down actually changes how everyone else in the room feels.

The Client Type Playbook

Recognize the pattern. Apply the right response.


Client Type 1: The Anxious Worrier

You'll Notice	What's Really Happening	What Works
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Calls or messages repeatedly- Google-diagnosed before arrival- Catastrophizes every symptom- Seeks excessive reassurance- "Is he going to die?"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Anxiety (often undiagnosed)- Pet = primary attachment figure- Lack of control in other areas- Trust deficit with medicine- Pure love – channeled poorly	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Slow down. Use simple language.- Give them a clear written summary- Acknowledge the love behind the worry- Set gentle, firm communication limits- "Here's exactly what to watch for..."

 *With anxious clients, the feeling of being heard matters more than the information you give.*

Client Type 2: The Demanding Client

You'll Notice	What's Really Happening	What Works
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– "I want to speak to the manager"– Specific, non-negotiable requests– Feels entitled to premium service– May threaten reviews/complaints– Impatient with wait times	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– High control need / type-A– Anxiety expressed as dominance– Money or status used as shield– Doesn't know how else to cope– Often loyal if handled well	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Give them choices – they need agency– Keep your tone even & undefensive– "What outcome are you hoping for?"– Involve them in the plan– Don't mirror their energy

 *Demanding clients aren't trying to be difficult – they're trying to feel in control of a scary situation.*

Client Type 5: The Financially Limited Client

You'll Notice	What's Really Happening	What Works
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Flinches visibly at the estimate– "That's so expensive" or silence– Delays decisions or leaves to "think"– Asks to skip recommended steps– Shame, avoidance, or defensiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Genuine financial hardship or crisis– Shame about not being able to "do more"– Fear of judgment from the care team– Love for their pet – not indifference– May be choosing between real needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Present tiered options, not one plan– "What budget are you working with?"– Lead with what you CAN do– Separate the medicine from the money– Know your clinic's payment/assistance options

 Budget conversations are not about money. They are about love, shame, and trust – treat them that way.

Client Type 3: The Grieving Client

Anticipatory grief

Their pet is sick but not gone yet. They're pre-grieving.

Anger as grief

Hostile clients may be devastated. Don't take the bait.

Blame

"If you'd caught this sooner..." – guilt projected outward.

Bargaining

"Just try one more thing." Letting go is not yet possible.

Numbness

No response, flat affect – shock is also grief.

WHAT HELPS

- ◆ Sit down if you can
- ◆ Use the pet's name
- ◆ "There are no right feelings here"
- ◆ Don't rush to fix or reassure
- ◆ Offer a private space
- ◆ "I'm so sorry you're going through this"
- ◆ Follow up with a card or call

Client Type 4: The Combative Client

There's a line between frustrated and unsafe. Know it.

Escalation Continuum

Frustrated	ENGAGE – use LEAP, stay calm
Angry	SLOW DOWN – increase distance, lower voice
Verbally Aggressive	PAUSE – set a limit: "I want to help. I need us to lower the temperature."
Threatening / Unsafe	EXIT & INVOLVE MANAGER – safety is non-negotiable

Remember: You are never required to absorb abuse. Protecting yourself is protecting your team.

Which client type do you find personally most challenging to work with?

The anxious over-researcher (Dr. Google)

0%

The demanding, entitled client

0%

The actively grieving client

0%

The combative or threatening client

0%

The financially limited client who pushes back on costs

0%

The anxious over-researcher (Dr. Google)



##.##%

The demanding, entitled client



##.##%

The actively grieving client



##.##%

The combative or threatening client



##.##%

The financially limited client who pushes back on costs



##.##%

RESULTS SLIDE

Setting Limits & Protecting Your Team

You can't pour from an empty cup – and neither can your team

How comfortable are you personally setting a professional limit with a difficult client?

Very comfortable – I do it when needed without hesitation

0%

Somewhat comfortable – I can do it but it stresses me out

0%

Uncomfortable – I usually absorb it rather than say something

0%

Very uncomfortable – I feel like it's not my place

0%

Very comfortable – I do it when needed without hesitation



##.##%

Somewhat comfortable – I can do it but it stresses me out



##.##%

Uncomfortable – I usually absorb it rather than say something



##.##%

Very uncomfortable – I feel like it's not my place



##.##%

RESULTS SLIDE

How to Set a Limit Without Escalating

THE FORMULA: Acknowledge + Limit + Offer

Example 1:

I can hear how upset you are about the wait – and I'm not able to continue if there is yelling – but I very much want to help. Can we step somewhere private?

Example 2:

I understand you're frustrated with the invoice – and I'm not able to offer services below our cost – but let me look at what payment options we might have.

Limits aren't walls – they're bridges to better conversations.

Compassion Fatigue: The Hidden Cost

~50%

of vet professionals report burnout symptoms

3x

higher suicide rate vs. general population

#1

reason vets leave: people stress, not medicine

Warning Signs in Your Team

- Emotional exhaustion after routine interactions
- Dreading work, especially client-heavy shifts
- Doubting professional competence
- Cynicism or detachment from clients
- Snapping at coworkers after difficult cases
- Physical symptoms: headaches, fatigue, insomnia

Does your clinic currently have a clear, shared protocol for what to do when a client becomes aggressive or threatening?

Yes – we have a written policy and everyone knows it

0%

Sort of – there's an informal understanding but nothing written

0%

Not really – it's handled case by case

0%

No – each person figures it out on their own

0%

Yes – we have a written policy and everyone knows it



##.##%

Sort of – there's an informal understanding but nothing written



##.##%

Not really – it's handled case by case



##.##%

No – each person figures it out on their own



##.##%

RESULTS SLIDE

Recovery & Building Long-Term Trust

What happens after the storm matters just as much as the storm itself

The Service Recovery Paradox

Research shows: clients who had a problem resolved well become MORE loyal than clients who never had a problem at all.

1

Acknowledge

Name what went wrong – no excuses. "I understand why you're upset about that."

2

Apologize Specifically

Not "sorry if you felt..." – just "I'm sorry that happened." Mean it.

3

Offer a Remedy

What can you concretely do? Small gestures (a callback, waived fee, handwritten note) land big.

4

Follow Through

If you said you'd call – call. If you said you'd check – check. This is where trust is built.

5

Document & Debrief

Log the interaction. Debrief your team. Turn difficult encounters into learning opportunities.

Building a Trust-Forward Clinic Culture



Proactive Communication

- › Set expectations before problems arise
- › Over-communicate on wait times & costs
- › Pre-visit client information sheets



Team Alignment

- › Consistent messaging across all staff
- › Practice difficult conversations together
- › Debrief after challenging cases



Client Education

- › Slow down during discharge conversations
- › Ask: "What questions do you have?"
- › Written summaries, not just verbal



Feedback Systems

- › Actively request reviews & feedback
- › Follow up after euthanasias
- › Track complaint patterns & fix root causes

5 Things to Take Home

01 Difficult behavior is almost always about fear, loss, or loss of control – not about you.

02 LEAP: Listen → Empathize → Acknowledge → Partner. Use it every time.

03 Matching your client type to your response strategy changes outcomes dramatically.

04 You can set a professional limit and still be compassionate. Both things are true.

05 Service recovery creates loyalty. The difficult client who leaves satisfied tells more people than the easy one.

What is one thing you'll do differently in your next difficult client interaction, based on today's session?

RESULTS SLIDE

Thank You

You can't control what clients bring through the door.

You can control how prepared you are to meet them there.

Questions & Discussion

Claws Out: Defusing Difficult Client Encounters