Partner Veterinary
EMERGENCY & SPECIALTY CENTER

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

40 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

Why Clients Become Difficult

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

Scan the QR Code

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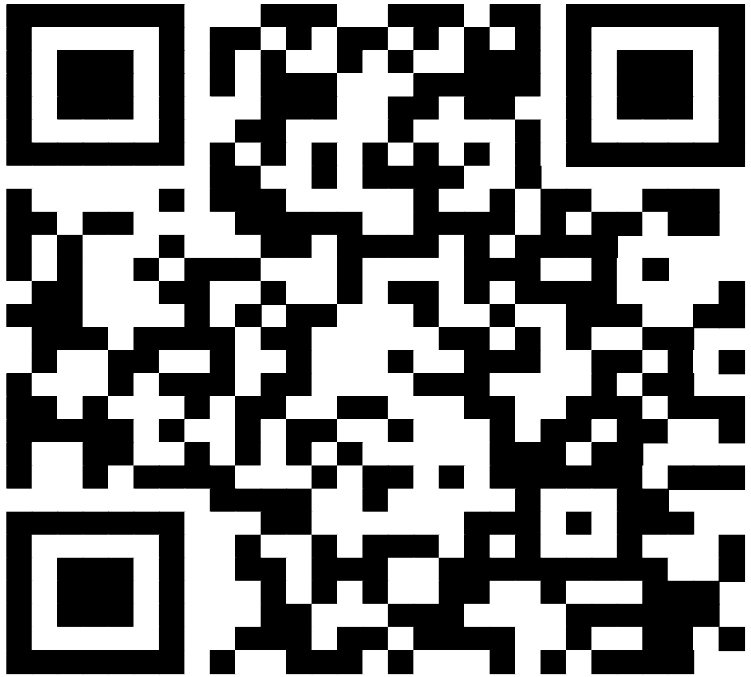
456-200-631



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 / AI
- Anxiety

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

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
– Calls or messages repeatedly	– Anxiety (often undiagnosed)	– Slow down. Use simple language.
– Google-diagnosed before arrival	– Pet = primary attachment figure	– Give them a clear written summary
– Catastrophizes every symptom	– Lack of control in other areas	– Acknowledge the love behind the worry
– Seeks excessive reassurance	– Trust deficit with medicine	– Set gentle, firm communication limits
– "Is he going to die?"	– Pure love – channeled poorly	– "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
– "I want to speak to the manager"	– High control need / type-A	– Give them choices – they need agency
– Specific, non-negotiable requests	– Anxiety expressed as dominance	– Keep your tone even & undefensive
– Feels entitled to premium service	– Money or status used as shield	– "What outcome are you hoping for?"
– May threaten reviews/complaints	– Doesn't know how else to cope	– Involve them in the plan
– Impatient with wait times	– Often loyal if handled well	– 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 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.

Client Type 5: The Financially Limited Client

You'll Notice	What's Really Happening	What Works
– Flinches visibly at the estimate	– Genuine financial hardship or crisis	– Present tiered options, not one plan
– "That's so expensive" or silence	– Shame about not being able to "do more"	– "What budget are you working with?"
– Delays decisions or leaves to "think"	– Fear of judgment from the care team	– Lead with what you CAN do
– Asks to skip recommended steps	– Love for their pet – not indifference	– Separate the medicine from the money
– Shame, avoidance, or defensiveness	– May be choosing between real needs	– Know your clinic's payment/assistance options

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

The Toolkit:
De-escalation in Practice

Concrete techniques that work – even when you're exhausted

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	SAY THIS INSTEAD
"Calm down."	"I want to make sure I understand your concern."
"That's not our policy."	"Here's what I can do for you right now."
"There's nothing more we can do."	"Let's talk about what options we still have."
"You should have brought them in sooner."	"I'm glad you're here now – let's focus on what we can do."
"I already told you..."	"Let me explain this a different way."

The 30-Second Reset

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

1	2	3	4
PAUSE	BREATHE	REFRAME	INTENTION
Step away from the door. Even 10 feet is enough.	4 counts in – hold 4 – out 6. Activates your parasympathetic system.	"They aren't angry at me. They're scared for their pet."	"I will listen first, respond second."

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

Setting Limits & Protecting Your Team

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

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%	3×	#1
of vet professionals report burnout symptoms	higher suicide rate vs. general population	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

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.

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 will you do differently during your next difficult client interaction?

Because you know it's gonna happen…

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