WHY DO CLIENTS SOMETIMES FAIL TO ACT IN THEIR ANIMALS BEST INTERESTS?

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RESUME

This lecture will describe problems with respect to three key processes that are likely involved in successful self-regulation – namely, problems setting goals (e.g., accepting the problem), monitoring progress (e.g., the ostrich problem), and taking action when needed (e.g., remembering to act).

A SELF-REGULATION PERSPECTIVE

Most veterinarians encounter clients who do not act (or appear to act) in their animal’s best interests. For example, over half of the domestic dogs in the US are overweight (a problem primarily determined by their owners’ actions) and evidence suggests that owners only protect dogs from ticks and fleas around 50% of the time. I have previously suggested that research into self-regulation can help to understand why clients overfeed (for a review of this idea, see Webb, 2015). This lecture will draw on this perspective to describe three reasons why clients sometimes fail to act in their animals’ best interests, more generally – because they have problems (i) setting goals (e.g., accepting the problem), (ii) monitoring their progress (e.g., the ostrich problem), and / or (iii) taking action when needed (e.g., remembering to act). Flea and tick prevention will be used as an illustrative example, but the ideas could be translated to other behaviours.

PROBLEMS SETTING GOALS

Goals are an important determinant of action and, thus, clients may not act in their animals’ best interests because they do not have goals, or the goals that they have are inappropriate or overly vague. Theoretical frameworks such as Protection Motivation Theory suggest that clients’ motivation to protect their pet from health risks such as ticks and fleas is determined by their appraisal (i) of the potential threat and (ii) of their ability to cope with that threat. Threat appraisal comprises clients’ evaluation of the severity of the threat (e.g., a client who does not believe that it matters if their animal gets fleas, would not deem the threat to be severe) and whether their animal is vulnerable to the threat (e.g., how likely the animal is to get fleas). Coping appraisal comprises clients’ evaluation of whether the actions that they take are likely to be effective (e.g., someone who believes that flea treatments are not effective will be less likely to use them, even if they deem the threat of fleas to be severe) and their ability to take the action(s) needed (e.g., someone might feel unable to give their animal a tablet or get them to the vets) along with any costs – financial or otherwise – associated with trying to reduce the threat. In short, unless clients believe that there is a threat to be mitigated and that they can do something to reduce that threat, then they are unlikely to set themselves the goal of doing so.

PROBLEMS MONITORING PROGRESS

Having set a goal (e.g., to protect the animal against fleas and ticks), the next stage in the self-regulatory process is to monitor progress toward this goal in order to identify when action is needed. However, problems can arise at this stage of the process as well, leading even clients who hold appropriate goals to still fail to act in their animals’ best interests. First, evidence suggests that there are times when people prefer not to monitor their progress, particularly when this may require them to confront information that reflects badly on themselves (a phenomenon that has been termed “the ostrich problem”). Therefore,
clients may be unwilling to accept that their animal is not sufficiently protected against fleas and ticks in an effort to protect their own self-image (i.e., as a 'good' pet owner). Even if owners do try to monitor their progress, it is possible that they struggle to accurately do so. For example, Lavan et al. reports that, although almost all veterinary hospitals in their study recommended that dogs be protected against fleas and ticks for 12 months of the year, most clients believe that their dogs require just 10.5 months of flea and tick prevention annually. Clients may also struggle to remember when they last provided flea and tick treatment, making it difficult to know if the animal is currently protected or not. In short, people need to assess where they are in relation to their goals in order to decide whether they need to take action.

PROBLEMS TAKING ACTION WHEN NEEDED

When monitoring indicates a discrepancy between the current and desired state (e.g., an owner checks their diary and realises that the flea and tick treatment is overdue), action needs to be taken. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done, especially when the action in question has to be performed relatively infrequently (e.g., monthly, as is commonly the case for flea and tick treatment) and is not part of day to day routines. Given that people hold and pursue many goals alongside caring for their animal(s) (e.g., to care for a family, succeed at work, and keep healthy), it is easy to see how care goals can get overlooked (consciously or unconsciously). Even if the person does remember that they need to take action, they may be unable to do so – either because they have not taken the necessary preparatory steps (e.g., bought flea treatment), struggle to overcome initial reluctance (e.g., worry that the treatment will make their dog unhappy), and / or fail to seize a good opportunity to act (e.g., when their dog is tired after a walk). These sort of problems – or Tasks of Realizing Intentions and Goals (TRIALS) – explain why people often struggle to translate their good intentions into action.\[^vi\]

CONCLUSION

Providing appropriate care for a companion animal is essentially a self-regulatory task in that it involves setting and enacting goals (e.g., to protect the animal against parasites). This lecture describes the challenges that clients may confront in this process and therefore shows that clients may not act in their animals’ best interests because they have problems (i) setting goals, (ii) monitoring their progress toward these goals, and / or (iii) taking action when needed. The hope is that veterinarians can use this framework to identify and understand the challenges that clients are likely to face and appropriately tailor strategies designed to help. (for ideas in this regard, see my next lecture on how clients can be helped to set and accomplish their goals with respect to care).

REFERENCES

\[^vi\] Sheeran P, Webb TL. The intention-behavior gap. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2016: 10;503-518