HOW CAN CLIENTS BE HELPED TO SET AND ACCOMPLISH THEIR GOALS WITH RESPECT TO CARE?

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RESUME

This lecture will focus on strategies for overcoming defensiveness (e.g., self-affirmation), effective goal setting (e.g., SMART goals), and strategies for translating intentions into action (e.g., monitoring progress and if-then planning).

A SELF-REGULATION PERSPECTIVE

In addition to providing medical insights and solutions, veterinarians are commonly tasked with helping their clients to set and accomplish goals with respect to caring for their animals. These goals can range from the specific (e.g., to remember to give medication twice a day for a week), to the more general (e.g., to help a dog to lose weight). I have previously suggested that research into self-regulation can help to understand the challenges that clients are likely to face (for a review of this idea, see Webb, 2015) and why they sometimes fail to act in their animals best interests (see my previous lecture at this conference). This lecture will show how this perspective can be used to help veterinarians to identify ways to help their clients to set and accomplish their goals.

GOAL SETTING

The first challenge is for owners to identify that they need to take action. This can be a difficult conversation for veterinarians as the implication is that the clients behaviour is, or is expected to be, problematic in the sense that it jeopardizes the health of the animal. For example, clients whose dog is overweight may need to accept that they have not been feeding or exercising the animal appropriately. Clients may respond defensively to such a suggestion and reject the idea that they need to take action. One possible approach to this challenge is to draw on research on self-affirmation, which suggests that affirming an important aspect of the self that is unrelated to the threatened domain (e.g., that one is hardworking or helpful to others) can serve as a buffer or coping resource when the self is threatened, thereby reducing defensiveness (for reviews, see Cohen et al., 2014). The implication is that veterinarians might prompt clients to affirm a core value before suggesting that they make changes to their behaviour. Although most strategies for promoting affirmation to date have involved writing (e.g., about how one evidences an important value in day to day life), it is possible that affirmation could also be achieved via, for example, a casual conversation, or “small talk”, during a consultation that provides the client with an opportunity to talk about something of value to them (e.g., their family, religion, or success at work).

Once the client is in the right frame of mind to set a goal, they then need to be helped to set an appropriate goal. Again, psychology can help here in the form of work on SMART goal setting. SMART is a mnemonic acronym referring to the properties of ‘effective’ goals (i.e., those that are most likely to be achieved) - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic (or Recorded), and Time limited. Most of these properties are self-explanatory, but they are worth holding in mind when prompting as client to set a goal; and perhaps even using them as a tool to prompt reflection. For example, a client with an overweight dog who says that they plan to walk their dog twice a day for an hour, might be asked to consider whether this is achievable and realistic, given that they work full time. It might be that a more realistic goal (one walk?)
would provide a better starting point or that such a reflection might lead the client to realise that they need to solicit the help of family members or a professional dog walker in order to achieve their goal.

GOAL STRIVING

Once a (SMART) goal has been set, the client then needs to be supported in enacting that goal. Sadly, bitter personal experience and scientific research converge on the conclusion that people often struggle to achieve their goals, leading many to talk about the road to hell being paved with good intentions (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-road-hell). A number of reviews have described the challenges that people are likely to face when striving to achieve their goals (or the Tasks of Realizing Intentions and Goals – TRIALS); therefore, here, I will just draw attention to two strategies that veterinarians might employ in order to help their clients to accomplish their goals: (i) monitoring and (ii) action planning.

Monitoring goal progress involves periodically noting qualities of the target behavior (e.g., how long a dog is walked for) and/or outcome (e.g., a dog’s weight) and comparing these perceptions with the respective goal. The client might be prompted to monitor their own progress (e.g., keep a record of how long they walk their dog or when they provide medication) or this could be done by the veterinarian (e.g., the dog weighed when it visits the practice, a record kept of how many prescriptions are redeemed). While many practices will already do these things, our research suggests that monitoring is particularly effective if it is (i) physically recorded in some way, and (ii) reported or made public. Therefore, it may help clients to accomplish their goals if they record their progress (e.g., in a diary or app) and also report this (e.g., email the record to the practice).

A second strategy that has proved effective in helping people to achieve their goals in a number of contexts is to prompt them to form plans that specify when, where, and how they will act. Planning can help to bridge the gap between intentions and action because it moves people beyond deliberating about what they will do and on to considering how they will act. However, some types of plan are more effective than others. Evidence suggests that plans which link a good opportunity to act with a suitable response in a contingent ‘if-then’ format are particularly effective. With this in mind, clients might be prompted to think about when and where they could strive for their goal (e.g., when and where they might be able to exercise their dog) and exactly what they will do in this situation (e.g., visit the park at the end of the street). Opportunity and response are then linked together in a contingent if-then format: e.g., “If it is Tuesday after work, then I will walk Tidge to the park at the end of the street!”

CONCLUSION

Helping clients to set and accomplish goals is both important and difficult. This lecture draws on insights from the psychology of self-regulation to propose novel ways that veterinarians might help clients to set appropriate goals (e.g., self-affirmation and SMART goal setting) and accomplish these goals (e.g., by monitoring and forming if-then plans).

REFERENCES


Gollwitzer PM: Weakness of the will: Is a quick fix possible? Motivation and Emotion 2014:38; 305-322.