

Stereotypic and compulsive disorders

1. Compulsive disorders often arise from situations of conflict or anxiety, but can appear spontaneously for no apparent reason. If the source of the stress or conflict can be identified, it should be addressed. Early intervention, before the problem becomes habitual or complications arise, provides the best opportunity for success. While pets likely have a genetic susceptibility to developing compulsive disorders, reducing sources of stress and providing outlets and opportunities to keep the pet stimulated and enriched can help to prevent the development of these problems or reduce their frequency or intensity. However, when the problem begins to affect the pet's normal daily functions or the problem is too frequent or intense, then it has likely become a compulsive disorder, which generally requires a combination of behavioral management and drug therapy.
2. Medical problems may be the cause of the behavior. Therefore, before diagnosing a compulsive disorder, all possible medical problems must be considered. In addition, if the pet begins to lick or chew at itself, regardless of whether the initial problem was behavioral or medical, the pain and infection caused by the licking will first need to be resolved. Unfortunately, since pets cannot let us know how they feel (i.e., itchy, painful, unable to help themselves) your veterinarian will need to determine this by diagnostic tests and possibly by a medication trial.
3. The treatment program should begin by identifying sources of stress and conflict for your pet and resolving them. By looking at when, where, and in what situations the problem was first seen, it might be possible to identify the stressors that caused the problem, so that these might be resolved. However, while this can be an excellent starting point, when the problem has become compulsive, treating the stress and conflict alone is seldom sufficient. For the behavioral workup and to measure progress, it may be helpful to make a video recording of the problem and keep a diary.
4. If you can determine when the problem is likely to arise and in what situations, it might be possible to prevent the problem or preoccupy the pet with another activity that is incompatible with the undesirable behavior. Environmental enrichment when you are not around should include toys, chews, or other activities that can help to keep the pet occupied and distracted.
 - (a) Cats: Give your cat new places to perch, new areas to climb or scratch, or paper bags or boxes to explore. Some cats will show interest in the television or a video. One way to keep a cat's interest is to find toys that simulate prey so that it has opportunities to hunt, chase, bat, or pounce on the toy. Toys that can be batted along the floor, hung from door frames, or are battery-operated will get the cat's interest if they are the right size and texture and are changed intermittently so they remain novel. Another way to maintain interest is to stuff toys with food, treats, or catnip. Some of the new toys now available are designed to be filled with food, treats, or catnip and require manipulation to remove them from the toy. Some cats are attracted to kitty herb gardens.
 - (b) Dogs: A variety of toys have been developed that can be coated, filled, or stuffed with food to attract and occupy the dog for long periods of time. Interest can be maintained in the toy if it takes time to remove all of the food. The time to empty a toy will depend on how motivated the pet is and what has been placed inside (e.g., liver is more interesting than biscuits for many dogs), texture, and novelty (alternate which toys and treats you use each day). In addition, a hungry dog is more likely to try and get the food out, while a sated dog may have no interest, so try placing some of the dog's meal in the toys. Freezing the toy after stuffing with moist food or treats can increase the duration of time spent chewing. Dogs that enjoy investigating and exploring may be better distracted by games where they have to search to find new toys and treats. Videos designed for dogs to view may be of interest to some dogs.
5. When you are home and available, social enrichment should be offered where the pet gets quality time with you (and vice versa), consistent and regular training to be able to communicate better what you want your pet to learn, as well as exercise and play that meet the needs of your family and your pet. Walks, swimming, jogging, and playing with toys, as well as training, should be the minimum; however, more rigorous games and structured activities such as agility, flyball, retrieving, or herding trials might better meet the needs of some dogs and breeds. For cats, toys for chasing that simulate prey generally work best. Social play with other pets and people can also be encouraged (e.g., dog parks) unless these situations make the pet uncomfortable (see Boxes 4.6 and 4.7).
6. Provide a predictable environment and routine. It is neither appropriate nor necessary to keep the pet engaged in activities at all times. By providing some regularity and predictability to the daily routine and by providing enrichment at the times when the pet most needs it (especially when it might begin to engage in the compulsive behavior), the pet should be able to settle into a bedding location at various times of the day where it feels comfortable and can relax (safe haven). A favored blanket or stuffed toys, television or white noise, a piece of your clothing, pheromones, or even aromatherapy might help the pet to feel more comfortable and secure. Of course, there is a great deal of variation between individual pets based on their behavioral genetics and anxiety level, but

pets can be calmer and more in control if they have a predictable routine and predictable environment where they have choices to engage in acceptable activities and are prevented from engaging in unacceptable behaviors. Any environmental change should be made slowly since some pets are particularly sensitive to novelty and change. Therefore, using similar bedding or litterbox, both familiar toys and new toys that interest and occupy the pet, confining to familiar areas, limiting access to new environments unless you are available to help ease the transition might be considered.

7. Provide predictable consequences and communication. Predictability in rewards (this refers to anything the pet wants) means that the pet learns what behaviors get rewards, which can only be achieved if you are consistent in each response (e.g., we will go out the door only if you sit first, you will get affection only if you sit calmly or lie down at my feet, you will be greeted only if you are quiet and sitting, we will continue to walk forward only if you keep the leash slack, you will get this chew toy only when you lie on the mat). Of course once the behavior is learned it needs to be placed on cue/command so that you can begin to communicate verbally what is desirable and the pet has learned the meaning from previous training and reinforcement. During training, you should also specifically focus on rewarding those behaviors that are desirable alternatives to the compulsive disorder such as go to your mat, down and stay, sit and watch, and come. Any training devices or techniques such as the head halter, body harness, clicker training, or Manners Minder that might be used to aid in the control and treatment of the compulsive disorder should be incorporated. For some pets, training devices can help you obtain and reward desired outcomes more quickly.
8. Your response to the pet's behavior is important as some responses can actually aggravate the problem.
 - (a) Positive punishment (application of a stimulus that decreases behavior) should, for the most part, be avoided in pets but particularly those with fear, anxiety, or compulsive disorders. Even if the punishment is consistent and timed properly to suppress the undesirable behavior, it can increase the pet's fear, anxiety, and conflict and may possibly damage the bond between you and your pet. In addition, punishment does not address how the pet should behave in the situation. Punishment can be avoided, for the most part, by supervision, confinement, or pet-proofing to prevent undesirable behaviors.
 - (b) Any attention, whether affection, treats, or toys to try and calm the pet, or even mild attempts at punishment, can inadvertently reinforce the behavior. While it is best to reward desirable behavior and ignore undesirable behavior, if you are unable to prevent the initiation of the stereotypy or compulsive behavior, the focus should be on interrupting the behavior as it first begins and teaching an alternative acceptable behavior (see Response substitution, below).
9. Response substitution and counterconditioning: Ideally the behavior program should reduce or eliminate the expression of further stereotypic or compulsive behaviors. However this may not always be the case. Counterconditioning can be used to change a pet's emotional response to a stimulus. For example, if visitors coming to the home or pets or people on the other side of a fence cause frustration and conflict, a favored reward can be paired with each exposure to make the association with the stimulus positive. However, the most practical way to modify the behavior is to teach the pet an alternative response by interrupting the behavior as it begins and engaging the pet in an alternative behavior which can be reinforced. Reward-trained verbal cues (e.g., come, lie down, go to your mat) and clicker training can be excellent ways to reward desirable behaviors immediately. Pets that cannot be effectively interrupted with verbal cues can be supervised with a leash attached either to a head halter (dogs) or body harness (dogs and cats) to prompt the pet gently to engage in an alternate behavior. Be certain to reward the pet immediately but only after the undesirable behavior has ceased and a desirable behavior is displayed.
10. Other options for interruption might be considered, such as a shake can, ultrasonic device, or remote spray collar, but only if they can be used to stop the undesirable behavior successfully without causing further fear, anxiety, or conflict. Similarly, prevention may be a useful or necessary adjunct to the program to try and break the cycle when the pet cannot be supervised. Sedation or devices that can physically stop the expression of the stereotypic behaviors (such as crates to prevent access to problem areas, tie-downs to prevent repetitive behaviors, Elizabethan collars and bandaging (perhaps with a bitter-tasting coating) for self-trauma, or muzzles for licking, sucking, and picas, may be considered. The pet should be monitored to ensure none of these techniques actually cause aggravation of frustration.
11. Behavioral drugs that help return the serotonin system to a more normal state of function, such as fluoxetine or clomipramine, can also be effective. However, additional drugs that further modify neurotransmitters, anxiolytic drugs, seizure medications, and medications that treat neuropathic pain could also be needed.