

PET-PROOF YOUR HOLIDAYS AND SANITY!

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Tis the season of good cheer, celebration and visits from family and friends. It can also be a season of stress for owners and confusion for pets. Take a deep breath and relax. With a little planning and supervision you can **balance the holiday energy for you and your pets**. Here are some tips and I am sure you have more creative ones of your own!

CREATE a SAFE HAVEN – CHEER not FEAR

Giving yourself a breath and a break is the first Holiday Gift. Even a few moments can make a difference for you and your pets. Try one now ... inhaling deeply into your diaphragm for 4, holding for 4, now slowly exhaling for 4. It only takes a few moments. We have to breathe anyway, so why not mindfully. The benefit is a calming, clearing effect on our body, mind and spirit. Remind yourself, “Been there, done that” and it usually works out. Delegating is okay too...

Most pets enjoy holiday festivity if they are desensitized to it. If they are not use to it, do not assume that they will be thrilled to meet relatives and friends, many who may not be use to pets. Dogs, cats and parrots can become anxious or protective around boisterous people and children, especially if the humans are not use to interacting with pets. And, alcohol changes everything.

With their strong olfactory (smell), and lack of supervision, turkey and ham are opportunities for dogs. Add in a couple of glasses of wine and magically everyone becomes a dog expert. Aunt Emma feels sorry for Scruffy so thinks he should be picked up and carried around. Uncle Henry thinks Spike should have a sip or two of spiked eggnog. Cats may bolt out the door, parrots may squawk endlessly, and you'll need several bathroom breathing breaks (and perhaps meds) to survive what could be prevented with a little planning.

Most of us have an **emotional need** to have our pets enjoy the festivities! If the pets are use to (desensitized) the excitement, and know how to calm themselves, or walk away, then this is fine. Most pets change, just like we do, when the energy level changes. **Plus, who wants to spend their holiday policing relatives and friends, most of who aren't listening anyway, and/or trying to explain why the dog should not be eating candy canes and rum balls?**

Often, it is better to allow our pets a private sanctuary (crate, downstairs, bedroom) to enjoy the Holiday Bliss from afar. Give them a safe haven (private place) with a favorite toy, a soft place to nap, some snacks and a radio or TV to help muffle the unusual sounds. Putting a worn T-shirt on the sleeping spot (for puppies) can be comforting. A Kong stuffed with healthy treats may entertain them as long as they are given regular bathroom breaks.

Meet greets are fine, if you know your dogs reaction / response to new situations. Should they be on leash so they won't jump or crotch-sniff the guests? Normal greeting rituals, dog-to-dog, can be embarrassing for unsuspecting relatives. All dogs, even puppies can show visitors a sit, while being offered a healthy treat. It's a great way to slowly get them use to what will be the inevitable – living with humans and all our celebrations. Solicit an older teen to take the pup / dog for a short walk being mindful that who you choose makes a difference. Is this teen responsible? Does s/he know dogs?

PREPARE YOUR HOME, MIND, BODY and SPIRIT (breathing in nose-to-navel)

Prevention is essential for a safe holiday celebration. If you're confident that your pet enjoys holiday festivities, you'll need to prepare your home. Before visitors arrive, put away objects your dog may covet,

such as toys or food bowls. A dog's tendency to resource guard can change and/or increase, if what they see is their possession and not the 4-year olds – one that isn't a regular family member.

HOLIDAYS ARE NOT THE TIME to BAT (behavior adjustment training). This isn't the time for repeated, unsuccessful reprimands either and not much fun for the dog. Be mindful of Chopper going nose-to-nose with toddlers over a ball. Sleeping dogs that are not use to someone in their face may naturally react – snapping, growling or even biting. Planning with a little script (written or in your mind) to gently let people know what they can and cannot expect to do with the pets is helpful (boundaries / guidelines).

BE READY TO INTERVENE ON YOUR PET'S BEHALF

This can be done with a smile and savvy, BUT DO IT, even if it creates temporary family friction. If Uncle Harry gets a hoot out of stocking your dog until he barks or tries to back away, stop him. If Aunt Emma likes to toot a loud bugle (this actually happened) into your Greyhound's ears – intervene. This is hurtful to the dog's ears – not to mention the stuff that a Greyhound can knock over in flight in two seconds is amazing. It is your house and this tiny "mistake" could create a hazardous situation -- stuff you'll have to deal with -- *not Uncle Poophead and Aunt Pita*. If the children are crawling under the table after your cat or poking fingers into the parrot's cage, stop them! Parrots can deliver a nasty bite, cats a wicked scratch -- not a good lesson for a toddler, who may grow up fearful of pets. ***Pets, children and adults can learn how to safely interact, meet and greet, and respect one another with appropriate games like fetch (outside) and sit, take a treat. Parrots love walnuts and will almost never bite anyone who offers one. HaHa***

WATCH FOR SIGNS OF STRESS

Dogs exhibit signs of stress by yawning, hiding, clinging, panting rapidly, freezing or trembling. If your dog closes his mouth as someone approaches and/or licks his nose/lips, s/he's saying, ***"I'm nervous about this! Stay away, take me away or let me get away."*** If your cat seeks higher ground, tail swishing back and forth or he hisses, he isn't happy about this encounter. If your parrot starts growling or shaking on the back perch ... it needs a time out. Cover them or close a door.

DESENSITIZATION AND SOCIALIZATION

You know that your dog is good with **your kids and enjoy activities**. Okay, but consider that the intensity of the holiday gatherings may be more than they want or need. We cannot control everyone and their children. If someone wants to bring a pet – fine, if they have played together and you want to expend the energy supervising.

Desensitization, socialization and manners are lifelong lessons for dogs and humans. We all experience jitters at new situations. Enjoying the holidays with our pets means giving them quality time even at a reduced rate, while keeping them safe when they need to relax.

There are easy ways to teach your dog to behave calmly around company and engage with children, but it can't be done overnight or during holiday visits. Embracing our pets as they are, by providing a safe haven, manageable meet and greets, and a promise to slowly socialize and desensitize more in the New Year is a special gift for our pets and us!

Happy Holidays!