



Notes from the Consultant's Corner

Dana Durrance, M.A.

“It’s Anxiety Holding on Line 1”

Tell me if this sounds familiar. Mrs. Smith has just dropped off her dog Spencer for chemotherapy to treat his recently diagnosed lymphosarcoma. You’ve just spent a whole hour talking with her, answering questions, addressing her concerns, and explaining things thoroughly. Fifteen minutes later, she calls you and asks how Spencer is doing. Another half hour later she calls again to see what’s going on. You assure her that Spencer is fine, that he’s not started his chemotherapy yet, but is resting comfortably in your back treatment area. You tell her you will call her when the treatment is over and when you have any updates. Twenty-five minutes later she calls you again and wants to know if Spencer is doing okay. Twenty minutes after that, she calls yet again.

So in walks your frustration. You’ve got a ton of things to do today and nowhere on the list is talking with Mrs. Smith every 20 minutes. Doesn’t Mrs. Smith have anything else to do in her life but to bother you? I’m sure many of you have experienced clients like these. They are the type who call incessantly, ask the same questions repeatedly, and even become hostile if you ask them to limit their calls.

You probably already know what’s going on here. Mrs. Smith is anxious. She loves Spencer, is highly bonded to him, and is having a hard time dealing with his cancer diagnosis. She feels helpless, scared, powerless, and she’s looking to you to help Spencer. In order to allow you to help him, she must withdraw her own control and place her trust in you. This makes her feel vulnerable and the way she’s coping with it is by repeatedly demanding special treatment as a way to “test” you (get your attention, regain control and “keep you on your toes”). She believes that if you are able to meet every demand that she throws at you, you are also capable of successfully treating Spencer.

Many clients like these don’t consciously decide to behave this way. They are unconscious reactions to anxiety. While it’s true that most clients cannot accurately assess your medical skills, they can most certainly assess your communication skills. If you are a good communicator, they will assume that you provide good medicine.

The best way to work with anxious clients is to acknowledge their feelings and normalize their emotions. Help them to speak about their fears more directly. Let them know you understand how important their pet is to them and that even though they feel anxious; they are doing the right thing by bringing their pet in for treatment. Assure them that you will provide regular updates, but eliminate their repeated calls by telling them that time on the phone is time away from the care you can provide. Most clients respond if you help them talk about their anxiety openly.

Other ways to reduce anxiety include: 1) paint a comforting visual image for clients: “Mrs. Smith, Spencer has just completed his chemotherapy, he is resting comfortably on a big, fluffy blanket and I’ve been stroking his neck while telling him what a beautiful boy he is. He’s enjoying watching the cat next door and every one is taking turns scratching his tummy. I have given him medication to reduce the chemotherapy side effects and we’ll monitor him for another hour and then you can come pick him up.” 2) Before a client starts with any treatment, offer to provide tours of your facility. People can be quite distrustful or fearful of medical facilities and often wonder about the things that take place in your “back rooms.” Though they may not openly share their fears with you, you can convey trustworthiness and warmth by showing clients that you are not “hiding” anything from them. 3) Self-disclose about your own emotions if you feel it is appropriate: “I love my dog too and if I were in your shoes, I would probably be feeling anxious too.”

When you have calmed Mrs. Smith’s fears and helped her to talk about her fears openly, she will likely become easier to communicate with. You will not eliminate her fears completely, but a little reassurance goes a long way.



(Photo from Dreamstime.com)