



Herbs for the Anxious Animal

By Lisa-Marie Maryott

If you are a pet owner, then chances are you have seen your pet stressed, anxious, and nervous at one time or another. Unless there is an underlying physiological reason for the anxiety – such as illness, pain, or nutrient deficiencies - reasons for anxiety can vary. For example, animals can become anxious and nervous when presented with people or other animals that they don't know, environments that are foreign to them, loud noises like fireworks, bad weather conditions like thunderstorms, and generally any situation in which the pet does not feel safe and secure. I think this last part – **safety and security** – are often the crux of the problem. Our pets then act out, sometimes leaving us to believe that they are crazy and that the behavioral issues being demonstrated are theirs and theirs alone. While there are certainly stress triggers (called “stressors”) that affect our pets and are out of our control (like thunderstorms), the reality is that we also may be unintentionally creating or allowing stressful conditions to affect our pets, and maybe we need to modify our behavior as well. But in all cases, we as pet owners owe it to our animal friends to identify the causes of stress and to help them cope with it and be less anxious and nervous. Luckily, we have different tools at our disposal to do just that.

This article covers one of these tools, **herbs**, and focuses predominantly on their use with small animal pets such as dogs and cats. Herbalists use plants as gentle and natural ways to help support an animal's nervous system so that it can adapt to or deal with stressors in a more effective manner. There are other tools such as nutrition and behavioral modification techniques that can also help, but I'll leave those for another day and another article...

These recommendations and guidelines should not be used as a replacement for appropriate and necessary veterinary medical advice and care, and it is always good to first visit your pet's veterinarian to rule out any physiological health issues that may be causing the anxiety and nervousness, especially if the reasons or causes are not evident.

Which Herbs Are Best?

There are plenty of fantastic western herbs that can be given to a pet, as they gently calm and support the nervous system before, during, and after stressful and anxious occasions. The “brass ring” or goal here is a calm animal that can maintain that demeanor even in the presence of stressors that would normally cause the animal to be nervous or anxious. Many herbs should be used more acutely, in that they should not be relied upon for long term use. Here are a few herbs that can help achieve the goal:

- **Flower essences** – Flower essences are a good first option to try. They are extremely safe to use, but not all animals respond to them. One essence that is widely used for anxiety and is readily available is [Bach's Rescue Remedy](#), which contains five different flower essences that can help the pet cope with stress and anxiety.
- **Skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*)** – One of my favorites for humans and animals alike, Skullcap is a tonic herb that reduces general anxiety and nervousness without drowsiness. As a tonic, it can be taken daily over a longer period of time, and I feel that it lays a foundation of calm from which other herbs can springboard during acute stress or anxiety attacks.
- **Passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*)** – Another one of my favorites, Passionflower can be used to “take the edge off” in lower doses and is sedative in higher doses. It can be used for pets with separation anxiety or anxiety or aggression demonstrated by barking, biting, hissing, or spitting. It is also a nice herb for a pet who is anxious and nervous on a regular basis. It combines nicely with Skullcap and Lemon Balm for these applications.
- **Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*)** – This is a gentle herb that can be used to treat general anxiety and depression and for the anxious animal that may also be having cognition issues (usually our senior pets). However, this herb should probably be avoided if the pet has hypothyroidism (under-performing thyroid).

- **Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*)** – Valerian is a lovely herb that can help decrease restlessness, fear, and aggression through its relaxing, antispasmodic, and sedative properties. A bit of Valerian can be used to reduce anxiety and nervousness in an animal that is generally passive by gently nudging the animal into sleep. One thing to note though – cats sometimes react to Valerian in the same way that they react to Catnip. It might cause them to become really relaxed or sleepy (a good result) or it could energize them (not the desired result).
- **Kava (*Piper methysticum*)** – I consider Kava one of the “heavier hitters” in that it is stronger and is best used for more significant anxiety attacks or stressful situations. Kava is a muscle relaxing sedative which can be used when the pet is anxious from loud noises such as fireworks and thunder, or when very agitated when separated from the owner. Like Valerian, it can help the pet rest and may induce napping.
- **Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*)** – As an adaptogen, Ashwagandha helps the body and the immune system adapt to or manage stress more effectively. This is a tonic herb that can be used in conjunction with other herbs listed here.

These herbs can be used singly or combined into a formula. Dosing can be tricky, as much depends on the herb selected, the level of anxiety the pet is experiencing, the desired result, and whether or not the herb will have an effect on the pet at all. Starting with smaller doses to see how the pet reacts is the best way to approach administration. In many cases, you can determine the dose in the same manner as you would for children, taking the average weight of an adult (150 lbs is a good number) and reducing the total dose for an adult to a dose that corresponds to the weight of the child or pet. Here’s an example of the math to determine the daily dose for a dog weighing 16 pounds:

Human Adult Recommended Dose: 1000 mg of herb
Divided by 150 lbs: 6.67 mg/pound
Multiply by 16 (weight of the dog): 106.67 mg of herb (about a tenth of the adult dose)

This amount would be divided into two or three doses each day. Adjustments up or down can be made for the wellbeing of the pet. When in doubt about the amount, consult with an herbalist or holistic veterinarian for appropriate dosing.

How Do I Give My Pet Herbs?

Many animals such as dogs, sheep, goats, and horses can easily ingest herbs in dried form, especially if they are food-motivated because the herbs can be added to the animals’ meals. Cats however, are a different breed and are not so easily duped or swayed into ingesting herbs in **any** form, and often must be more forcefully dosed directly into the mouth to ensure that the herb is ingested.

Herbs can be administered as dried (powdered) in the pets’ food, made into a tea and added to water or dropped into the mouth (the latter option may be the necessary one in many cases), or as an alcohol or glycerin based extract (diluted in water). They can also be made into “pills” (example – dried herbs mixed with peanut butter or raw honey and rolled into balls) or put into pet treats for easier administration.

References

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[Herbs for Pets, The Natural Way to Enhance Your Pet’s Life](#), by Gregory L. Tilford and Mary L. Wulff

[Medical Herbalism](#), by David Hoffmann

Nervines for Canines and Healing Herbs for Companion Animals, articles by Cat Lane (www.herbmentor.com)

Ohlone Herbal Center, Apprenticeship educational program and clinical practices