

Behavior Is Health

How behavioral medicine supports the whole pet, the whole family, and lifelong wellbeing.

Evergreen Veterinary Hospital




EVERGREEN
Veterinary Hospital

Behavior is not "bad behavior." It is communication.

When a dog growls at the veterinary clinic, or a cat hides under the bed for hours, or a puppy destroys furniture every time the family leaves the house — these moments are rarely about stubbornness, spite, or a pet who simply wants to cause trouble. They are signals. They are a pet's most honest attempt to tell you that something feels wrong, overwhelming, confusing, or unsafe.

Behavior is the language of the inner world. It reflects fear, pain, anxiety, chronic stress, unmet needs, environmental mismatch, learned associations, and sometimes underlying medical concerns that have gone unrecognized. A pet cannot use words to say "I am scared every time the thunder starts" or "my joints ache when I climb the stairs and I can't explain why I've stopped wanting to play." Instead, they communicate through the only vocabulary available to them: action, reaction, avoidance, and body language.

At Evergreen Veterinary Hospital, we believe that understanding behavior begins with listening — not correcting. Before anything else, we want to understand what your pet is trying to say and what may be driving the behavior beneath the surface. That perspective changes everything about how we approach the conversation, the evaluation, and the care plan that follows.

 The American Association of Human-Animal Bond Veterinarians recognizes that behavioral communication is one of the most underutilized diagnostic tools in veterinary practice — and one of the most important for quality of life.

Behavioral health affects quality of life for pets and for families.

Think about everything behavior touches in the daily life of a pet. How they eat and drink. How they sleep — whether peacefully or restlessly. How they move through the home, explore, play, and rest. How they greet family members, tolerate handling, respond to children, and engage with the world outside. Behavior is woven into every single moment of a pet's life. It is not a side issue. It is the lived experience of the animal in your care.

A pet who is fearful, chronically anxious, reactive, or persistently stressed is not simply inconvenient to live with. They are struggling. Their nervous system is working overtime. Their stress hormones are elevated. They may be eating less, sleeping poorly, moving differently, or withdrawing from the family bonds that give their life meaning and safety. For some pets, that internal distress is constant, not episodic — and it takes a real toll on overall physical and emotional health.

Behavioral health shapes:

- Appetite and digestion
- Sleep quality and rest
- Movement and play
- Learning and responsiveness
- Recovery from illness or surgery
- Tolerance of veterinary care

Signs of behavioral distress include:

- Hiding or withdrawal
- Trembling or panting inappropriately
- Reduced engagement with family
- Aggression or reactivity
- Changes in elimination habits
- Loss of interest in normal activities

For families, the impact is equally real. Living with a pet who is visibly struggling can be emotionally exhausting, isolating, and deeply heartbreaking. Pet owners often blame themselves, assume the behavior is unfixable, or quietly carry the weight of feeling like they are failing an animal they love. That is a burden no family should carry alone — and it does not have to be the end of the story.

Hidden Cost of Ignoring Behavior

Behavioral concerns have a tendency to quietly compound over time. What begins as a dog who is nervous at the vet or a cat who occasionally avoids the litter box can evolve — without support — into patterns that strain the human-animal bond, disrupt the household, and in the most difficult cases, lead to outcomes that no family ever wanted. Understanding the full weight of untreated behavioral health is not about fear — it is about perspective, and about the real difference that early support can make.

Strained Human-Animal Bond

Frustration, avoidance, and helplessness erode the relationship between a pet and their family — often gradually, and often without the family realizing what is being lost.

Avoided Veterinary Care

When vet visits cause panic for a pet and dread for the owner, appointments get postponed or skipped. Important preventive care and early illness detection are delayed as a result.

Risk of Injury and Safety Concerns

Reactive, fearful, or aggressive behavior can put family members, other pets, visitors, and veterinary teams at risk — with consequences that extend far beyond a difficult moment.

Shelter Surrender

The ASPCA reports that in 2024, 29% of animals entering shelters were surrendered by owners who could no longer care for them. Best Friends Animal Society data found that non-aggressive behavior issues appeared in the top five reasons for owner surrender for both dogs and cats, cited in 7.8% of surrender cases.¹

Behavioral Euthanasia

Among 615 dogs brought to a shelter for owner-requested euthanasia, 16% were presented due to behavioral reasons — primarily aggression toward people or other animals. These are heartbreaking outcomes that behavioral medicine may help prevent.²

❏ ¹ ASPCA, 2024 Shelter Data; Best Friends Animal Society Surrender Research. ² Patronek GJ et al., research on owner-requested euthanasia in shelter populations.

Common Behavior Concerns Evergreen Can Help With

Behavioral medicine covers a wide spectrum of concerns — from the dog who trembles through every thunderstorm to the kitten who bites without warning, to the senior cat who has started eliminating outside the litter box. These concerns are common. They are real. And they deserve a thoughtful veterinary response. The following are some of the most frequently encountered behavioral challenges that the Evergreen team is equipped to address alongside your family.



Fearful Veterinary Visits

Fear at the clinic is one of the most common and most solvable behavioral challenges. Fear-free approaches help pets build better, safer associations with care.



Separation Anxiety

Destructive behavior, vocalizing, or elimination when left alone are classic signs. This is a recognized anxiety disorder — not bad manners — and responds well to a structured behavior plan.



Noise Phobia

Thunderstorms, fireworks, and other sudden sounds can trigger intense fear responses. Medication and behavior modification used together can provide meaningful, lasting relief.



Reactivity on Walks

Lunging, barking, or pulling toward other dogs or people can make walks unmanageable and stressful. Reactivity is often rooted in fear, not aggression, and can be addressed with the right support.



Aggression Concerns

Aggression toward people, other animals, or unfamiliar environments requires careful evaluation. Understanding the trigger, the context, and any medical contributors is essential before any plan is built.



House Soiling & Litter Box Issues

One of the most common reasons cats are surrendered or euthanized — yet many cases are highly treatable once medical and behavioral factors are thoroughly evaluated.

Destructive Behavior

Compulsive or Repetitive Behavior

New Pet Transitions

Multi-Pet Household Conflict

Puppy & Kitten Foundations

Senior Cognitive Changes

A Familiar Story

CASE STUDY

i Please note: The following is a representative composite case study based on common veterinary behavior concerns seen in clinical settings. Molly is not a specific patient. This scenario is used for educational purposes only.



Meet Molly

Molly is a four-year-old mixed breed dog living with a loving family in a quiet suburb. She is sweet at home — cuddly, playful, and gentle with children. But outside of that safe bubble, Molly is struggling.



The Patterns Her Family Sees

Walks have become a source of dread. Molly pulls, barks, and lunges whenever she spots another dog or a stranger. During thunderstorms, she shakes and pants for hours.. At the veterinary clinic, she trembles before the car even stops.



How Her Family Feels

Molly's family is overwhelmed. They feel embarrassed on walks, and helpless during storms. They have tried training videos, advice from online, and simply avoiding the situations that trigger her. The behaviors are not improving. If anything, they are getting worse.

"We don't know what else to do. We love her so much, but we feel like we're failing her — and we're exhausted."

Molly's story is not unusual. It is, in fact, one of the most common scenarios the Evergreen team encounters. The love is present. The effort has been real. What was missing was a veterinary conversation about what was actually driving Molly's fear — and a structured, compassionate plan to help her.

"They'll grow out of it."

These are some of the most common things veterinary teams hear from well-meaning, caring pet owners who are doing their best to make sense of behavior that confuses or distresses them. They are not wrong to try to find an explanation. They are simply looking at the action rather than the cause — and those are two very different lenses.

What Families Often See

- A dog who won't walk nicely on a leash
- A cat who bites without warning
- A pet who destroys furniture when left alone
- An animal who "hates" the vet
- A dog who snaps at strangers
- A cat who stops using the litter box

What May Actually Be Happening

- Fear, pain, or chronic stress driving reactivity
- Overstimulation or a medical contributor
- Separation distress that feels unbearable
- Conditioned fear from past negative experiences
- Anxiety, not aggression, at its core
- Urinary discomfort, stress, or behavioral trigger

When a family describes their pet's behavior using words like "stubborn," "vindictive," or "dramatic," it is almost never an accurate reflection of what the animal is experiencing. Pets do not have the emotional complexity to be spiteful. What looks like defiance is almost always an expression of something the animal cannot manage on their own — and often, something they desperately need help with.

Evergreen's role is to help families look beneath the surface. Not to judge the behavior, not to judge the owner, but to ask better questions. What is this pet trying to communicate? What might be making this worse? And what would help them feel safer, calmer, and more confident in the world they live in? That shift in perspective — from judging behavior to understanding it — is where meaningful progress begins.

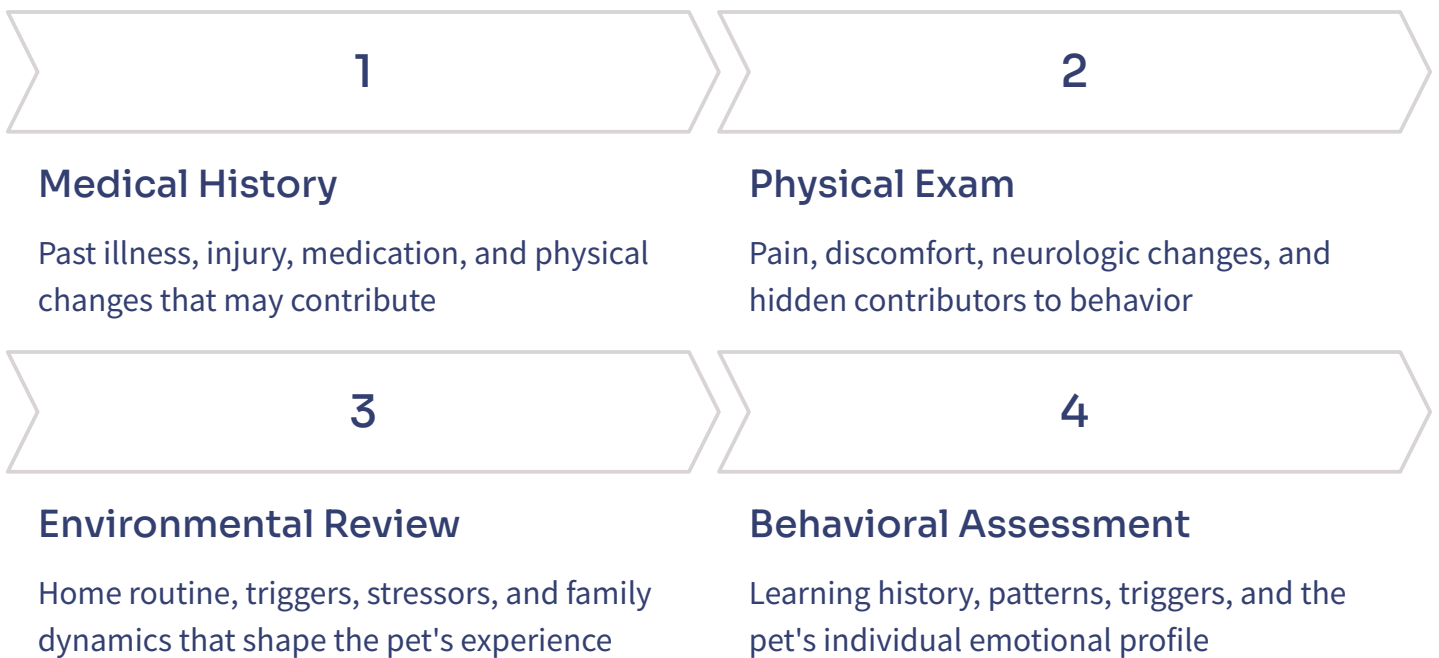
- ☑ The AVSAB affirms that reward-based, humane methods offer the most benefit and least harm to animal welfare, and that serious behavior problems — including fear, aggression, separation anxiety, noise phobia, and compulsive disorders — should be evaluated by a veterinarian.³

- ☐ ³ American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB) Position Statement on Humane Dog Training.


Behavior starts with the whole pet.

One of the most important — and most underappreciated — aspects of behavioral medicine is that it cannot be separated from physical health. A dog who suddenly becomes aggressive may be in pain. A cat who stops grooming or starts hiding may have a thyroid condition, a urinary issue, or early cognitive dysfunction. A pet who is increasingly anxious may have an underlying neurologic concern, a nutritional deficiency, or a condition that has simply never been diagnosed because no one connected the behavior to the body.

This is why behavioral medicine belongs in the veterinary exam room. A behavior coach, no matter how skilled, cannot run bloodwork, assess physical pain, evaluate neurologic function, or prescribe medication when it is clinically appropriate. A veterinarian can — and at Evergreen, that comprehensive lens is the starting point for every behavioral conversation.



The AAHA 2015 Canine and Feline Behavior Management Guidelines were created specifically to ensure that the basic behavioral needs of dogs and cats are understood and met in every veterinary practice — and that veterinary teams are equipped to save lives, prevent euthanasia, prevent relinquishment, and give real hope to pet families facing behavior concerns.⁴

 ⁴ AAHA 2015 Canine and Feline Behavior Management Guidelines; AAHA/AVMA joint behavioral health guidance.

Dr. Ellen Puthoff

Dr. Ellen Puthoff graduated from The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine in 2017. She is a native of Troy, Ohio, and completed her undergraduate work at Miami University. Dr. Puthoff's professional interests include internal medicine with experience in ultrasound imaging.

She is an advocate of fear-free medicine and passionate about behavior medicine, with a goal of lifelong success for her patients.



Our Approach to Behavioral Health

Every family who comes to Evergreen with a behavioral concern deserves a response that is organized, thoughtful, and genuinely supportive — not rushed, not dismissive, and not overwhelming. Our approach is built around five guiding commitments that carry every behavioral case from the first conversation through to long-term progress.



Listen

We begin by genuinely understanding your concerns — without judgment. Your observations matter deeply. You live with your pet. No one knows their day-to-day experience better than you do, and that knowledge is essential to what comes next.



Evaluate

We look for medical, emotional, neurological, and environmental contributors. A behavioral concern is rarely one-dimensional — and our evaluation reflects that complexity.



Plan

Together, we create a realistic, individualized path forward. Plans are built around what is actually manageable for your family and meaningful for your pet — not a generic protocol.



Support

We walk alongside you with follow-up, education, and adjustments as your pet progresses. Behavior change takes time, and consistent support makes a real difference.



Protect

The ultimate goal is improved safety, comfort, and long-term wellbeing — for your pet, for your household, and for the bond between you that made you seek help in the first place.

Behavior Is Not One-Size-Fits-All

There is no single protocol that works for every anxious dog, every reactive cat, or every household navigating a behavioral challenge. Behavioral medicine is nuanced because behavior is nuanced. At Evergreen, we resist the temptation to reach for a quick fix or a universal checklist. Instead, we build care plans that reflect the individual pet, the specific concern, and the real life the family is living.

Comprehensive Medical Exam

Before any behavioral plan is built, we rule out physical contributors — pain, illness, hormonal changes, and neurologic concerns that may be driving or amplifying the behavior.

Fear-Free Handling Strategies

How we deliver care matters as much as the care itself. Fear-free techniques reduce stress during the visit and help pets build more positive associations with the veterinary environment over time.

Environmental Modifications

Changes to the home environment — routine, layout, resources, predictability — can have a powerful, immediate impact on a pet's baseline stress and emotional regulation.

Behavior Modification Plans

Evidence-based behavior modification using reward-based, humane methods helps pets build new, positive associations with previously frightening situations or stimuli.

Medication When Appropriate

For pets whose anxiety, fear, or compulsive behavior is severe enough to prevent progress, medication can provide meaningful relief — not as a permanent solution for most, but as an important tool in the larger plan.

Client Education & Follow-Up

We equip families with the language, tools, and understanding to recognize what their pet is communicating — and to respond in ways that build trust rather than inadvertently reinforce fear.

Referral support is also part of the Evergreen commitment. When a case requires the expertise of a board-certified veterinary behaviorist, we will help coordinate that pathway — because our goal is the best possible outcome for your pet, regardless of where that road leads.

Why Fear-Free Matters

For many pets, the veterinary clinic is one of the most consistently stressful environments in their lives. Strange smells, unfamiliar sounds, slippery surfaces, confinement, handling by strangers — even pets who are otherwise confident at home can find the clinical setting genuinely overwhelming. When that stress accumulates over months and years, it changes how a pet experiences care, how cooperative they can be during an exam, and ultimately how thorough and safe their care can actually be.

Fear Free veterinary medicine is a structured, evidence-based approach to reducing fear, anxiety, and stress in pets during veterinary visits. It recognizes that the emotional experience of care is a clinical concern — not a soft extra, not a nice-to-have, but a direct factor in the quality of the medicine being delivered. A pet who is trembling and panicking during an exam cannot receive the same quality of assessment as a pet who is calm and cooperative. Pain thresholds change under stress. Heart rates elevate. Responses are distorted.

Reduced Stress Responses

Fear-free techniques — including pheromone use, low-stress handling, minimal restraint, and careful pacing — measurably reduce physiologic stress responses during visits.

Better Diagnostic Accuracy

A calmer pet allows for a more thorough, accurate physical examination — which means better data, better diagnoses, and better care decisions across the board.

Improved Long-Term Associations

Each positive veterinary visit gradually replaces the conditioned fear response with a more neutral or even positive one — making future care progressively easier and safer.

Stronger Client Trust

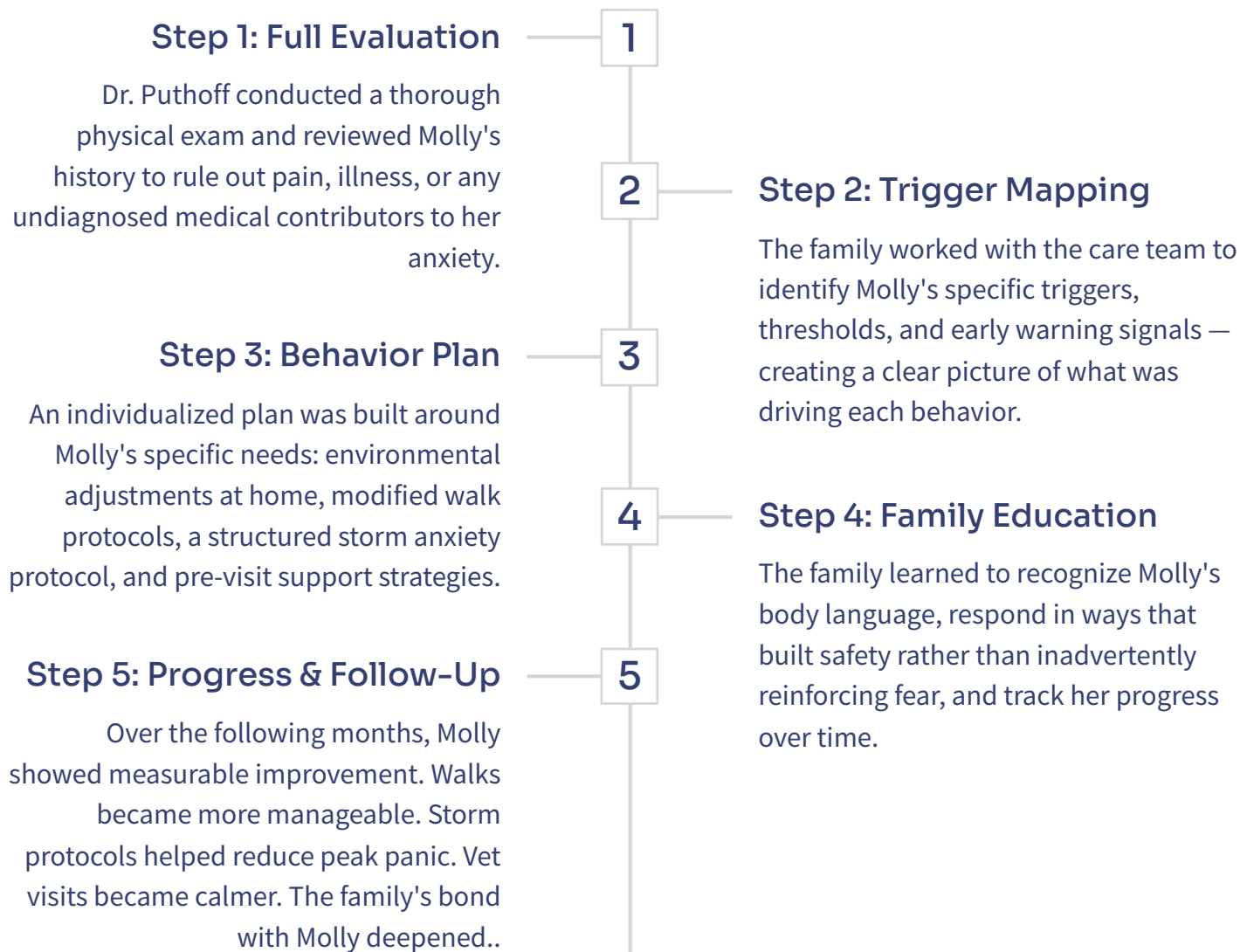
When families see their pet handled with gentleness and respect, it deepens their confidence in the care team — and makes them more likely to seek care early and consistently.

At Evergreen, Fear Free principles are not a protocol reserved only for pets flagged as anxious. They are part of how we practice — woven into every appointment, every handling decision, and every interaction between our team and your pet. Dr. Puthoff's Fear Free certification reflects a deeper commitment: that how we make pets feel is part of the medicine itself.

Molly: What Happened Next

CASE STUDY OUTCOME

When Molly's family finally brought their concerns to Evergreen, they were expecting to be told their dog needed more training. What they found instead was a conversation — a real, unhurried conversation about Molly's full history, her daily environment, her triggers, and what life at home actually looked like. They felt heard, not judged, for the first time since the behaviors had begun.



"We're not aiming for perfect. We're aiming for progress — for a pet who feels safer, a family who feels supported, and a bond that grows stronger under the weight of unaddressed fear."

- ✔ The goal was never to eliminate Molly's personality. It was to give her the tools — and give her family the knowledge — to navigate the world more safely and comfortably together.

What Success Actually Looks Like

Success in behavioral medicine rarely looks like a sudden transformation. There is no moment where an anxious dog wakes up and simply decides to be fearless. Behavioral progress is quieter than that — and in many ways, more meaningful because of it. It is built in small moments, accumulated over weeks and months of consistent, compassionate support.



A Calmer Clinic Visit

A dog who walks into the exam room with less trembling than last time. That is progress — and it matters enormously for the quality of care they can receive.



Consistent Litter Box Use

A cat who returns to using the litter box reliably — reducing household stress and keeping the family together.



A Stronger Family Bond

A family who now understands what their pet is communicating — and can respond with confidence, patience, and genuine connection.



A Safer Home

Fewer crisis moments. Reduced risk of injury. An environment where both the pet and the people who love them feel secure.



More Manageable Daily Life

Walks that are enjoyable again. Mornings without dread. Evenings where the whole family — including the pet — can simply rest.



A Pet Who Feels Understood

Perhaps most importantly: a pet who experiences their world as safer, less threatening, and more navigable — because someone took the time to understand what they were trying to say.

Behavioral Health Keeps Pets With Their People

There is a moment that far too many families reach — quietly and with enormous guilt — where the love for their pet is still very much present, but the capacity to manage the behavior has run out. It is not a failure of love. It is a failure of support. When behavioral resources and guidance are not available, or not sought in time, families reach a breaking point that can lead to outcomes that no one wanted and everyone grieved.

The Data Is Clear

The ASPCA reports that in 2024, **29% of animals entering shelters were surrendered by their owners** — pets whose families could no longer care for them.

Best Friends Animal Society found that **non-aggressive behavior issues were among the top five reasons for surrender for both dogs and cats**, appearing in 7.8% of surrender cases.

Among 615 dogs brought to a shelter for owner-requested euthanasia, **16% were there specifically for behavioral reasons** — primarily aggression toward people or other animals.

What Early Support Changes

These are not statistics about bad pet owners. They are statistics about families who ran out of options, ran out of guidance, and ran out of hope before behavioral support could reach them. The trajectory of a pet's life can be profoundly changed by a single, well-timed veterinary conversation.

Early behavioral support — before the frustration becomes unbearable, before the household feels unsafe, before the isolation becomes complete — gives families a real alternative to surrender. It gives pets a chance to stay in the homes where they are loved.

This is why the AAHA guidelines exist. This is why Fear Free certification matters. This is why Evergreen takes behavioral health as seriously as any other dimension of veterinary medicine

29%

Owner Surrenders

of shelter intake in 2024 were surrendered by owners ¹

7.8%

Behavior-Related

of surrenders cited non-aggressive behavior as a top reason ¹

16%

Behavioral Euthanasia

of owner-requested euthanasia cases in shelter research were behavior-related ²

A Message From Evergreen, to Every Pet Family Reading This

If your pet is struggling — if the walks are hard, the storms are terrifying, the vet visits fill you with dread, or you simply cannot figure out why your animal does what they do — please hear this clearly:

You are not failing your pet. You are not a bad owner. You are not asking too much by wanting more peace, more safety, and more connection in your home. You may simply need a different kind of veterinary conversation.

Behavioral medicine gives families language. It gives you the words to describe what you are seeing, the framework to understand what your pet may be experiencing, and the tools to respond in ways that build trust rather than compound fear. It gives pets a voice — because someone is finally asking the right questions about what they are trying to say.

We know that reaching out about behavioral concerns can feel vulnerable. It can feel like an admission that something is broken. But behavior concerns are medical concerns. They deserve the same clinical attention, the same compassion, and the same commitment to evidence-based care as any physical diagnosis. At Evergreen, that is exactly what they receive.

We are here to help you understand your pet.

Not to judge how you've handled things until now. Not to make you feel like you've fallen short. But to genuinely partner with you in building a better, safer, more joyful experience for the animal you love.

Evergreen cares for your pets like our own.

That is not a tagline. It is the standard we hold ourselves to in every appointment, every conversation, and every care plan we build — including those that begin with a behavioral concern.

One of the most common questions families have about behavioral health is: *How do I know when it's serious enough to bring up at the vet?* The answer is both simpler and broader than most people expect. If a behavior is affecting your pet's quality of life, your household's wellbeing, or your ability to provide consistent care? You need only to notice that something feels off, and to bring that observation to someone who can help you make sense of it.

Your pet avoids or withdraws from activities they previously enjoyed

Changes in engagement, play, appetite, or interaction with family members deserve a closer look — especially when they appear gradually or without obvious cause.

Your pet hides, trembles, growls, snaps, or panics in response to stimuli

These are fear and anxiety responses — not personality quirks. They signal a pet who is genuinely struggling to feel safe in their environment.

Veterinary visits are consistently stressful or unsafe for your pet or your care team

Fear at the clinic is not something a pet should have to simply endure. Fear-free approaches can change the experience significantly — but they require a proactive conversation.

Walks, public spaces, or routine activities feel unmanageable

If you are dreading routine outings with your pet, that is important information. Reactivity and leash anxiety are behavioral concerns with real, effective treatment paths.

House soiling or litter box avoidance has appeared or intensified

This is one of the leading reasons pets are relinquished — and one of the most treatable once both medical and behavioral factors are evaluated together.

You feel overwhelmed, isolated, or unsure how to help your pet

Your wellbeing matters too. If caring for your pet's behavioral needs has become a source of chronic stress or distress, that is every bit as valid a reason to seek support as any clinical symptom.

You do not need a diagnosis to start a behavioral conversation. You just need to feel like something isn't quite right — and trust that Evergreen will help you figure out what to do next.

Behavior is part of medicine because behavior is part of life.

Every wag, every growl, every hidden tremor, every moment of joy or fear that a pet experiences is an expression of who they are and how they feel. Behavioral health is not a specialty add-on. It is core to what it means to care for the whole animal — the body, the mind, and the emotional life that connects your pet to your family.

Evergreen Veterinary Hospital, Dr. Ellen Puthoff, and the entire Evergreen care team are here to help your pets feel safer, your family feel supported, and the human-animal bond stay strong — through every stage of your pet's life, including the hard ones.

Evergreen Veterinary Hospital

Centerville, Ohio
A locally owned companion
animal practice

Dr. Ellen Puthoff

Fear Free Certified
Professional
Behavior Medicine Advocate

Our Promise

We care for your pets like
our own — in every visit,
every conversation, and
every care plan we build
together.

If you believe a behavior-focused visit may be right for your pet, we warmly invite you to reach out. A conversation is always a good place to start.

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Centerville, Ohio • Caring for your pets like our own.