

Holistic Medicine for the Problems of Rescue Animals

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Rescue groups abound in the US, from breed-oriented groups, to facilities focusing on animals with special needs, to groups affiliated with municipal shelters. Certain problems are common to shelter animals as a group, such as infectious respiratory diseases, digestive upsets, and behaviour problems. Many of these issues can be worsened by the rescue environment; in some cases, conventional treatment can prolong the problem. The objective of this talk is to share effective symptomatic holistic and homeopathic treatment for problems such as 'kennel cough', and stress colitis, musculoskeletal issues, and anxiety associated with rehoming.

According to estimates by the American society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA)¹, approximately 7.3 million dogs and cats are cared for by animal shelters every year. Of these, 2.7 million animals are euthanised; 31% of the dogs, and 41% of the cats. This represents about 2% of the total 140 million dogs and cats in the US. This is an improvement over the situation in the 70s when it was estimated that 12 to 20 million dogs and cats were euthanized annually, or roughly 25% of a population of 65 million. Many of the euthanized animals are not adoptable because of serious health or behavioural problems. There is no mandatory statistic reporting or collection for shelters; they are locally overseen, governed, and funded, so these are only estimates. About 150 shelters in the US do post statistics on the Asilomar Accords website.²

Shelters and rescue groups vary considerably in their ability and determination to address health and behavioural issues. Medical interventions for physical problems are hampered primarily by financial constraints. The nature of emotional and behavioural problems, variable staff familiarity with positive training, and the paucity of safe and effective conventional medical interventions creates even greater mental health obstacles. The ASPCA has on-line resources and training to help shelter personnel³, but not surprisingly, integrative options are not discussed.

What have these shelter rescue animals experienced, and why are they in this situation? Animals arrive at shelters because they are surrendered by owners, picked up as strays, or removed from abusive situations. The location of the shelter and remit of the local animal control officers affects the number and kind of animals housed. Animals may be well socialized and in good physical condition, such as those given up when families move, or youngsters from unplanned litters. Other animals may have survived terrible conditions, such as rescued puppy mill breeding stock, or hoarding situations. Most shelters actively foster pets out to breed specific rescue groups or other foster facilities. The length of time animals are housed varies; a minority of public shelters are no-kill shelters because of space considerations. Maddie's Fund⁴ and the ASPCA¹ do have some statistics, but as the number of shelters nationwide is not even known, these are based on a limited sample.

A 2013 study of factors affecting adoption⁵ verified the common belief that youngsters spend less time in the shelter, and that length of stay increases with age. Extra small and giant dogs were adopted faster than medium sized breeds in the shelters studied. In personal communications with shelter personnel and shelter vets, other adopter

preferences emerge which are not amenable to statistical analysis. Friendly animals, provided that they are not overly noisy or boisterous, are desired. Frantically barking, or worse yet, howling, dogs are shunned. Animals that will not engage with people are not desired. These are not unrealistic preferences! Many shelters and foster carers try to socialize and train dogs to display more desirable behaviours.

There are significant limitations in working with rescue animals. Usually the history for the patient is limited. There is the issue of diet, as well as treatments or vaccinations required by the rescue which can affect the patient's long term health.

To understand a patient, look at symptoms expressed by the patient as a whole. These symptoms require less interpretation. People have a tendency to over analyse symptoms, ascribing causes or emotions which may or may not be there. This is especially tempting when you want to help rescue animals, who often have been in bad situations.

Watch for and focus on general symptoms such as:

Modalities - better or worse at certain times of day / night, from rest / motion, firm / light pressure, seek or avoid warmth, other aggravating or ameliorating considerations

Location of signs - where are the signs, do they move or change

Objectively observable signs - demeanour, level and nature of movement in the cage / home, discharges and nature of discharge

Causation - Did this start upon arrival at the shelter / foster? Is it better or worse when people are around? Was it occurring in the previous home after some other event (if known!)?

Food - what does this animal desire / dislike, and what disagrees

If you are interested in references that discuss a holistic approach to animal care, one of the best is Hansen's "The Complete Book of Cat and Dog Health".

To help advocate for animals in your care, Kay's "Speaking for Spot" will help you get the most out of every vet visit, whether conventional or integrative.

If you want to explore homeopathy in greater depth, I suggest Lockie's "The Family Guide to Homeopathy", as an excellent resource. This book is written for people (well obviously, animals can't read) and does not specifically address animal problems. However, most problems are similar and often directly referable. If you use homeopathy for yourself, you will understand better how to use it for your animal friends.

Two very common rescue problems are particularly rewarding to treat holistically: kennel cough and stress colitis.

Most people who have been around dogs for any length of time are familiar with the honking or barking cough of kennel cough. Kennel cough is caused by a one of a number of respiratory organisms (virus, or bacteria) transmitted when dogs are in close contact. These dogs may have nasal discharge, but they generally do not feel very ill; they may vomit food because the cough is so violent.

Suppose you have a six month old Standard Schnauzer foster puppy that you took to the dog park with his daily companion, his 2 year old boxer neighbour, last weekend. Your pup didn't seem to have that much fun, as the other dogs were rather pushy. Yesterday your pup started with a honking cough; his boxer buddy is fine, and both dogs are alert, active and eating well.

If you take your dog to a vet with a strictly conventional approach, they will likely send you home with a week's worth of antibiotics and cough suppressants, and instructions to avoid other dogs. Some may also suggest boosting his kennel cough vaccine. So what is the problem with this?

Antibiotics are not recommended because this is usually a viral disease. Internal medicine specialists do not recommend using antibiotics for self-limiting respiratory infections because antibiotics decrease beneficial bacteria, creating gut dysbiosis, and increase bacterial resistance to antibiotics.

Cough suppressants may suppress the cough, but they will also depress your dog, and research indicates that cough suppressants increase the length of time animals and people show signs of disease.

Vaccine labels all state that they are only for use in healthy animals.

A holistic practitioner will talk about avoiding stress that would make your pup more susceptible to these infections. Dog parks are a poor choice for many puppies, as there are a significant number of people who do not adequately supervise their dogs. There is no reason to avoid the boxer buddy, as the two dogs are together every day, so the boxer has already been exposed. The holistic practitioner may provide cough suppressants if the cough is so severe that the dog and family can't rest, but they would suggest trying other methods of providing relief first. An holistic practitioner will advise you that humidifying the airways with time in a steamy environment will help the cough, and may suggest warm drinks such as slippery elm or other 'Throat Coat' teas as demulcents.

Homeopathic medicines are chosen according to the nature of the cough:

Rumex is indicated for a harsh painful cough, which sounds dry but may bring up mucus.

Cough is better from drinking, worse cold or temperature change, worse touching larynx.

Spongia coughing sounds as if something is in the throat, with a honking nature and often gagging at the end, it is better from eating or drinking, and in warm moist environments.

Ipecacuanha is associated with a violent cough, which sounds wet or rattling, possibly with retching or vomiting.

Ant tart coughs have a lot of phlegm, which is difficult to bring up.

Kennel cough nosode has been used in some kennels to abort outbreaks of KC, as in Chris Day's 1987 study⁶.

Stress colitis is another rewarding problem to treat.

Dogs develop diarrhea from stress and excitement as well as from eating things that they shouldn't. This is often seen in dogs surrendered to shelters; change of environment, diet, and other stressors are likely contributing factors. As long as the dog is feeling reasonably well (active, interested in food, no vomiting, small amounts or no blood in the stool) it is safe and reasonable to treat diarrhea symptomatically. Of course, if a patient is depressed or dehydrated, they may need fluid therapy.

Mucus on the stools is a normal protective response of the intestinal tract to inflammation and irritation. Sometimes there will be a wee bit of blood on the stools because many dogs strain when they have diarrhea. Large amounts of blood can be more serious, and will require examination of the pooch.

Symptomatic Approach for Diarrhea:

1 - If the dog is medium to large (over 20 pounds) and there is a large quantity of diarrhea, it is best to start with a day of fast. During this day, you can give fluids, including electrolyte replacement fluids and broth, but no solid food. This gives the intestines a rest, and allows the lining to regenerate. If there is little or no diarrhea during the fast, and the dog feels good, you can resume feeding as indicated below.

2 - Offer plenty (frequent small amounts) of water, ice, and other clear fluids (such as low sodium chicken broth) to ensure that the pet remains hydrated.

3 - Feed frequent small meals of bland, easily digested food. I use plain cooked meat, as cooked meat is slightly easier to digest than raw. (My own animals all eat raw otherwise.) Some people want to add grains, if so, I would suggest cooked oatmeal. In digestibility studies with dogs, turkey is the most digestible protein, and oatmeal is the most digestible grain. A study of fecal (stool) quality showed that rice produced looser stools than barley or sorghum.

3 - Fiber slows the movement of food and enhances fluid absorption. Pumpkin is a good source of fiber to add, as is psyllium husk.

4 - Provide probiotics to replenish the natural bacteria that are being flushed out of the tract by the diarrhea. Probiotics are safe for all animals. Some people give them daily at a low dose; during times of digestive upset double the daily dose. There are many probiotic sources, and they vary widely in quality and number of live active bacteria. I like Aunt Jeni's Digestive Aid for everyday use. When there is severe diarrhea I will use the human products of PrescriptAssist, VSL 3, or HLC Mindlinx. There are many other high quality probiotics.

5 - Ensure that parasites are not a major complicating factor by having a stool checked.

6 - Use homeopathic remedies appropriate to the individual's signs. I give a dose of the chosen homeopathic medicine in a 6 X, 6 C, or 12 X potency after each diarrheic stool. There should be significant improvement within a few hours, if not, the remedy is probably not correct, and the case should be re-evaluated. You can mix the medicine in a little water and give to the dog, or you can put a few granules on a spoon and add a few drops of non-chlorinated water to it; most dogs readily lick it off the spoon. Homeopathic medicines appear to work best dissolved in water.

7 - If the diarrhea persists, or if at any time the patient's condition deteriorates, consult your local holistic vet.

Symptomatic homeopathic remedies for diarrhea are chosen by evaluating specific and general symptoms:

Aloe - Diarrhea is associated with flatus and spluttering, it is usually worse in the morning, and often contains mucus.

Argentum nitricum - These patients develop diarrhea when they are excited, such as dogs on holiday or in competition.

Arsenicum album – This is the remedy most often used for gastrointestinal signs from eating unusual foods or garbage. Animals are usually restless, and may have nausea or vomiting as well.

China - This diarrhea is often periodic, recurring every few days. The patient frequently has gas, and feels tired from the diarrhea.

Kali bich is associated with summer diarrhea, the stools may be foamy or yellow, the dog may vomit mucus

Natrum mur assists diarrhea with mucus, often when there is a history of grief or loss; the patient will not seek attention.

Phosphorus - These patients have sudden onset of watery stool with blood. They are usually thirsty, and may vomit right after eating. They seek attention.

Podophyllum – These patients have explosive diarrhea, often with a lot of gas, frequently in warm weather. They often seem uncomfortable / crampy before the diarrhea, and are better afterwards.

Pulsatilla – These animals have changeable signs, often resulting from dietary indiscretion or overeating fatty foods. These dogs want to be out in the open air, and they may belch.

They feel worse from warmth and fatty food.

Staphysagria is often associated with summer diarrhea, often worse from surgical procedures and from eating.

Sulphur – These animals have early morning diarrhea which is quite foul smelling. They may have skin issues and rectal irritation.

There are many more remedies which can help with diarrhea. It is important to choose the homeopathic medicine that best fits the patient's signs.

Joint injuries and osteoarthritis are common in our animals, whether couch potatoes, weekend warriors, or finely tuned athletes. We can minimize the risk of injuries, and keep our animals active and flexible lifelong with excellent nutrition, sensible conditioning, appropriate environmental management, and interventions when needed.

It is not uncommon for elderly patients, or patients with joint problems to be given up to shelters. Sometimes the owners relinquish them because they can no longer deal with the animal's mobility problems. Other animals are suffering from abuse or neglect, or are recovering from surgical procedures.

I do not use conventional anti-inflammatories for muscle and tendon injuries. They decrease inflammation by suppressing the body's natural healing mechanisms. This does decrease pain and inflammation, but it also encourages the individual to over use the affected body part before it is actually healed. In addition, many conventional analgesics and anti-inflammatories have significant potential side effects.

What kinds of treatments might you receive from your complementary practitioner?

Acupuncture and acupressure improves circulation, and decrease pain and stimulate healing.

Animals with joint problems often benefit from chiropractic care to improve their body mechanics.

Sports medicine and rehabilitation vets can help with stretches and exercises to strengthen problem areas.

Laser therapy with a veterinary cold laser, or at home light therapy or Assisi loop stimulate healing.

Orthotics may be helpful, especially for smaller patients, under 50 pounds.

What self-care options do you have?

Optimize diet, and avoid feeding kibble. All kibble is extruded, a high heat and pressure process that destroys nutrients and produces pro-inflammatory substances. Many dogs eat kibble and appear to do well on it, but I have seen incredible improvements in dogs with chronic problems (such as the chronic inflammation associated with arthritis) when they stop eating highly processed kibble. Few human foods (only some pastas and cereals) are extruded like kibble; the process was developed to increase the length of time animal food could be stored when there were metal shortages in World War 2. Human food for long term storage without cans, like MREs and astronaut food, are freeze-dried or dehydrated, which retains a lot more nutrients and doesn't create the free radicals that increase inflammation.

The diets that I prefer are complete and balanced ground raw diets, but not everyone is comfortable with feeding raw. Freeze-dried or dehydrated raw or canned diets are good choices, provided that they are excellent quality. 'The Whole Dog Journal' has discussions of various foods, and the on-line Dog Food Advisor also rates foods for quality.

Remember the importance of maintaining a healthy body weight. Our animals can not open the fridge, so we bear the responsibility to show restraint on their behalf!

Similarly, animals can't take themselves for walks, so we need to be motivated in that area as well.

Many animals can be helped by the application of dry warm or cold packs to the affected area, and restriction of exercise.

Massage and energy work are helpful, provided the animal likes them. Gently massage areas with a smooth, gentle kneading, starting above the sore or stiff area, and ending below it. Some animals only want very light pressure; less pressure is better than too much. Most animals like energy work. Always give the animal the choice to allow the massage or energy work.

I like orthopedic pet beds, but dogs certainly have varying opinions about them. Many furry dogs prefer to sprawl on bare floors, and some dogs don't seem to want anything to do with beds. If your dog likes beds, an orthopedic one is a good choice, though it can take some dogs a bit of time to get used to the feel of the foam. I suggest lounging in it with the dog!

Homeopathic medicines stimulate healing, and thereby decrease pain and inflammation, so when an animal that is receiving homeopathic medicines feels better, they actually are better. Let's look at general symptoms that can help us choose symptomatic medicines.

I will admit that I do have a go-to combination for joint sprains and strains. I initially use Arnica and Ruta, substituting Rhus tox for Ruta if the patient limbers up and feels better after moving around. I decrease the frequency of administration as the patient improves. A 30 C potency is initially given once or twice a day, a low potency (6x, 6C, or 12X) may be given up to 3 or 4 times daily when the injury is painful.

Other indications for homeopathic medicines that may be useful for trauma include:
Arnica – Bruising / trauma; often given pre and post surgery / dentistry.

Bellis - Bruising / trauma of delicate tissues such as the breasts or scrotum. This is dramatically helps dogs castrated as adults to resolve post-op swelling.
Eupatorium perf - Controls bone pain, such as from fractures or dental extractions, or even bone cancer.
Symphytum - Eases fracture pain and speeds fracture union, it is also relieves eye trauma.
Staphysagria - Post surgical pain which seems excessive for the procedure.
Hypericum - Pain associated with injury of nerve rich areas such as toes, nose, and tail tip; back pain related to disc disease or spondylosis.
Rhus tox - Stiffness which improves after patient begins to move around, worse after rest.
Ruta - Stiffness (often of ligaments) that is not significantly better from motion.
Causticum - Geriatric patients with weakness, stiffness, and loss of function

Supplements decrease inflammation, and ensure that adequate nutrients are present for joint repair. I list some helpful supplements and their doses below. You will need to calculate the total quantity of the various supplements depending on weight.

Vitamin E (d alpha tocopherol = natural vitamin E), dose 10 IU /#
Anti-oxidant.

CBD oil or extract as recommended by manufacturer. Be sure that the product is tested for purity and activity and third party verified. I use CannaPet / Assisi products.
Decreases inflammation, enhances mood, calming.

Omega 3 fatty acids (DHA, EPA in salmon oil ideal), dose 1,000 mg / 20 – 40 #
Decreases inflammation, improves cardiac health

S-adenosylmethionine (SAME, must be taken on an empty stomach), dose 10 mg/lb
Detoxifies free radicals, regenerates intracellular glutathione, enhances mood.

Curcumin, dose proportional to human dose
Anti-inflammatory, anti-neoplastic, improves neuron and liver health.

Devil's claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*), dose proportional to human dose
Traditional African medicine for joint pain; don't use with antiarrhythmics

Glycosaminoglycans: glucosamine sulfate and chondroitin sulfate, dose 7-12 mg / # of each
Protect and regenerate cartilage, mild anti-inflammatory

Methylsulfonylmethane (MSM), dose 10 mg/ #
Antioxidant

Many arthritic dogs are already receiving chondroitin, glucosamine, and MSM. Always check the dose by weight, as many supplements do not provide much of the active ingredients. Glucosamine, chondroitin, and MSM act synergistically, providing a greater benefit when they are all given together.

It is a good idea to start supplements one at a time. This way you can see what is helping, and ensure that the pet does not have an over reaction to too many supplements! CBD products provide the quickest relief from pain. CBD (cannabinoids) have the THC removed, so they are legal and non-toxic. There is a lot of information on the company websites, especially CannaPet. Then add in chondroitin, then vitamin E, then fish oil, then curcumin, then, if there is still noticeable stiffness or lameness, SAM-e.

Except for the SAM-e, all of the other supplements can be given with meals. I use human products for most of these in my dogs, though there are some good pet products out there.

Sometimes it is hard to find pet products that don't have a lot of other ingredients or flavorings, and pet products are not necessarily tested for quality and potency as rigorously as human products. I research brands that I am interested in on line, as it is so difficult to read the tiny print on the labels, and my eyes aren't getting any better! I do like CannaPet CBD, Carlson's vitamin E, Barlean's fish oil, and Source Naturals SAM-e. I have used a lot of different glucosamine / chondroitin / MSM brands, the difficulty with my crew is finding ones with enough active components for their weight.

I suggest curcumin for older dogs, or those that have had a cancerous tumour removed. Curcumin from turmeric is known to decrease the growth of cancerous cells, and it is quite safe. It also decreases inflammation. There is a lot of information on line about curcumin. The dose for a dog is roughly proportional to that for people, with human doses based on a 120# person.

Many of the dogs that I treat for behavioural problems are rescues who developed these problems around the time of adoption. This is not surprising considering the magnitude of this traumatic experience. The real wonder is that so many animals apparently adapt well. Environmental and social changes (rehoming, new family members, loss of loved ones) are incredibly significant to animals, and when people fail to recognise and mitigate the negative effects of environmental change, animals may communicate their stress with behavioural and / or physical illness.

Behaviour is how animals communicate their physical, social, and emotional state, and express their needs, desires, and limitations. Modern humans are not adept at decoding animal behaviour. This is unfortunate, as more companion animals lose their homes because of undesirable behaviours than for any other reason. A shift is underway, as behaviourists explore what animals are expressing with their normal behaviours, thereby improving communication between species. To best address behavioural problems, we must understand normal behaviour for the species, and how problems arise.

It is vital to understand and respect the social needs of animals. Many people (and far too many vets) have an obsolete understanding of animal behaviour, relying on dominance, compulsion, and punishment in their interactions. The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior(AVSAB) has research based position statements on dominance and punishment to help with understanding. Board certified clinical animal behaviorists are now emphasizing management and retraining practices that are respectful of the social and emotional needs of the animal. Far too often the first recourse in dealing with behavior problems is aversive training or drug therapy. Homeopathic and herbal medicines provide a gentler approach, helping the animal deal with their emotions, as they improve overall well being. In most cases, treatment should also include teaching the animal appropriate behaviours to replace the problem behaviours, with the human partner learning how to avoid problem situations.

I encourage rescuers and new pet guardians to use Bach flower essences liberally⁷. There is no down side to their use, as they are very safe, and do not appear to interfere with the action of conventional , homeopathic, or herbal medicines. The Bach essences gently

rebalance the mental / emotional state, and can be put in the water bowl; this is not the deep healing, but it is much gentler than psychoactive drugs.

Essential oils can help many animals both behaviourally and for other physical issues.

Animal EO has the highest quality single oils and blends that I have found.

Cannabinoids (CBD products) help many anxious animals.

Homeopathic medicines can be used symptomatically, and they can be dissolved in water to drip on very fearful animals:

Aconite - Animals that are fearful of being touched, and cringe away.

Belladonna - Violently frightened animals, with dilated pupils that may lash out.

Argentum nitricum - Generally friendly animals experiencing anxiety with trembling, they may also have diarrhea.

Ignatia - Grief with hysterical behaviour, such as digging or pacing, in sensitive animals that may alternate moods.

Nat-mur - Grief and depression in reserved, well behaved animals.

Phos-ac - Grief in a mild tempered animal, especially when such an animal has weakness and depression

Long term, deep healing, with homeopathic or herbal medicines will require an in-depth assessment of the individual.

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