

The Value of the Fear Free Initiative

An Interview with Dr. Marty Becker



Dr. Marty Becker has spent his career working toward better health for pets and the people who love them. He was the resident veterinary contributor on *Good Morning America* for 17 years; a founding member of Core Team Oz—a group of key guest contributors for *The Dr. Oz Show*, and a *Today Show* contributor. Currently, Dr. Becker is the Chief Veterinary Correspondent and a Board of Directors member of the American Humane Association. He also practices at North Idaho Animal Hospital in Sandpoint, Idaho, which fulfills his love of veterinary medicine, pets, and the people who care for them. In recent years, his greatest

commitment and dedication has been to the concept of “taking the *pet* out of *petrified*,” and ensuring that every pet and pet owner can experience a “fear free” veterinary visit.

Can you explain the Fear Free Initiative?

Simply put, Fear Free is a commitment to better pet health and well-being based on an understanding of the detrimental effects of fear and stress on animal health and the damage it does to the veterinarian–client–patient relationship. This initiative relies on protocols, products, and procedures designed to reduce or remove stress, anxiety, and fear from trips to the veterinary clinic and other pet service providers.

How was the idea for Fear Free born?

My first introduction to *stress-less handling* began almost 30 years ago when famed behaviorist and champion of the human–animal bond—R.K. Anderson, DVM, MPH, Diplomate ACVB & ACVPM—came to our Salt Lake City All Pet Complex to show us how to turn the typical *All Pain Veterinary Hospital* into the *All Treat Veterinary Hospital*. We took baby steps in that direction, but it was viewed as just another customer service concept and certainly not a practice imperative.

Later, I was exposed to veterinary behaviorists, such as Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & ECVB (Companion Animal); Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB; and Wayne Hunthausen, DVM. However, the idea of Fear Free was born in 2009 when I heard behaviorist Karen Overall, MA, VMD, PhD,

Diplomate ACVB, say in a lecture that fear was the worst thing a social species could experience and it caused permanent damage to the brain. By the end of her talk, I realized we in the veterinary profession were causing repeated, severe emotional and physical harm to pets by focusing only on animals’ physical well-being, but not their emotional well-being.

How did you get your idea off the ground?

After leaving Dr. Overall’s lecture, I actually felt sick to my stomach thinking about all the pets who had been unintentionally harmed under my care. But I also saw what an incredible opportunity this was for our profession. I contacted as many key influencers and experts in veterinary medicine as I could (I have a good Rolodex!), telling them what I’d learned, discussing why I thought this was the reason veterinary visits continued to decline, and asking for their help in taking action on an urgent obligation. I reminded them of our oath as health care professionals: “To first do no harm.” I told them “fear free” veterinary visits are an aspirational goal for veterinary medicine.

What does Fear Free look like today?

With special help from Dr. Gary Landsberg, we have assembled an almost 150-person Fear Free advisory panel, which has been lecturing

and teaching widely. We helped create a Fear Free resource center, and developed a brochure on the *Top 10 Ways to Get Started with Fear Free Veterinary Visits* (available at dvm360.com/fearfree or through the local representative for Boehringer Ingelheim, CEVA Animal Health, or Elanco Animal Health). We've also formed task forces to create training modules that will enable veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and other team members to become certified in Fear Free, which is a collaborative effort with AAHA and NAVC and will be hosted on VetFolio (due to be available this year).

Why should veterinarians take this initiative seriously?

I grew up in the "hell-care" system of the 1950s and 1960s. At both doctor and dentists' offices, the focus was only on our physical well-being, not our comfort and emotions. Human health care professionals, especially those involved with children, realized things had to change. Now when a child—like my 6-year-old granddaughter—needs to visit a pediatrician or child-friendly dentist, it's like going to a medical office disguised as a spa. As veterinary health care professionals, we are basically pet pediatricians for life. As such, we have to take steps to make sure that the pets under our care aren't just physically healthy, but emotionally healthy.

What is the value of becoming certified as a Fear Free veterinarian, technician, team member, or practice?

Some people mistakenly think anxiety, stress, and fear are mostly feline problems. They're not. Fear affects almost every pet. The great news is that between the incredible foundation veterinary behaviorists have created and the work of the Fear Free Advisory Panel, we now know the simple, almost surefire steps that veterinary health care professionals can take to reduce or remove anxiety/stress/fear triggers. By taking advantage of the cornucopia of Fear Free materials already out there and by becoming Fear Free certified, everybody wins. We get to "Do well by doing good!"

Turn to page 8 to read this issue's Editor's Note in which Dr. Lesley King shares her thoughts on the Fear Free initiative and its importance in practice.