

HOW TO AVOID A STRESS-FEST WHEN GROOMING YOUR PET

You'd think that all dogs would enjoy a good bubble bath, body massage, & pedicure, but that's not always the case. At times, you may even have felt as though it is a hopeless task & have given in to allowing someone else to groom your dog. It can be a truly distressing experience for him and, over time, he can become downright traumatized from it whether in your hands or in someone else's. Regardless of whether you take on the task yourself or hand your pooch over to a professional, there is still much you CAN do at home to make the "procedure" less stressful for your beloved four-legged friend.

Take the time to train your pet to enjoy being groomed. Forcibly restraining pets for procedures such as a toenail trim can make them more fearful or reactive each time you try and they will become progressively more fearful or aggressive each time it is performed. Dogs can be trained to enjoy regular handling procedures such as pilling, grooming, tooth brushing, toenail trims and often in a very short amount of time -- such as 5 minutes. The more skilled you become at pairing positive experiences with the previously unsavory handling, and the fewer bad experiences the dog has had, the quicker the good behavior can be achieved. Here is a proven technique you can use to prepare your dog for the inevitable grooming well in advance of the actual event. (This technique also works if the dog is fearful of the tub, water, etc.):

1. If the mere sight of a grooming instrument, such as clippers or a brush, causes your dog to duck for cover, you may want to choose a quiet time of day & allow your dog to relax in his favorite spot. The object of this exercise is to *desensitize* your pooch by using the art of distraction. Have the frightful instrument nearby, but hidden from his view. You will also want to have some extremely yummy (but healthy) treats, such as some leftover roast chicken or steak, hidden in your pocket. While the dog is relaxed, give him a few small pieces of the treat to grab his full attention. If possible, have another person with you to lure your dog's attention away from the instrument you are about to bring out of hiding. Using toenail clippers as an example, have your "assistant" gently & briefly handle the dog's paw while you are holding the treat in your closed hand, keeping the dog's attention on your hand as he tries to get to the treat with his mouth & pointed away from the paw being handled. Then, ask the assistant to stop handling the paw & allow him to have the treat. Repeat several times until you are confident the dog is not paying attention to his paw while being handled & only to the treat in your hand. Do not rush through this step!

2. In the next step, tap his feet with the clippers using the same technique to distract him as described in the previous step. Be sure to hold the treat tightly while allowing him to lick it & try to get it out of your hand as he is being handled. Give him the treat when the handling stops. If the treat is of high enough value, he will be completely immersed in trying to get it away from you. Repeat this several times until he equates being handled with getting treats & non-handling with no treats. (You will know you've done it properly if he looks at you expectantly for more treats when you pause before the handling resumes.) Do not rush through this step!

3. Now, using the same technique, place the clippers over the dog's nail, but without actually clipping it. Repeat several times. Do not rush through this step!

4. You may stop the desensitization training here if you intend to have the nails clipped by someone else at a later time. This process should be repeated for several days & every few days thereafter until the dog no longer reacts with fear or aggression when the clippers are brought to his toe. If you intend to clip the nails yourself, you can proceed with clipping the nail (just one) while he attempts to get the treat from your hand. Give him the treat the instant the clippers are pulled away. Until you are proficient at knowing how close to the quick (the flesh inside the nail) you should clip without actually nicking it, it is best just to snip the tip of the nail for sole purpose of desensitizing him. That way, you will not risk reversing your efforts while practicing the technique. The entire process should take less than fifteen minutes & in time, you will be able to do it in less than five minutes--without treats!