

# The Fear Free Revolution

## *How Dr. Marty Becker's movement is helping Labs*

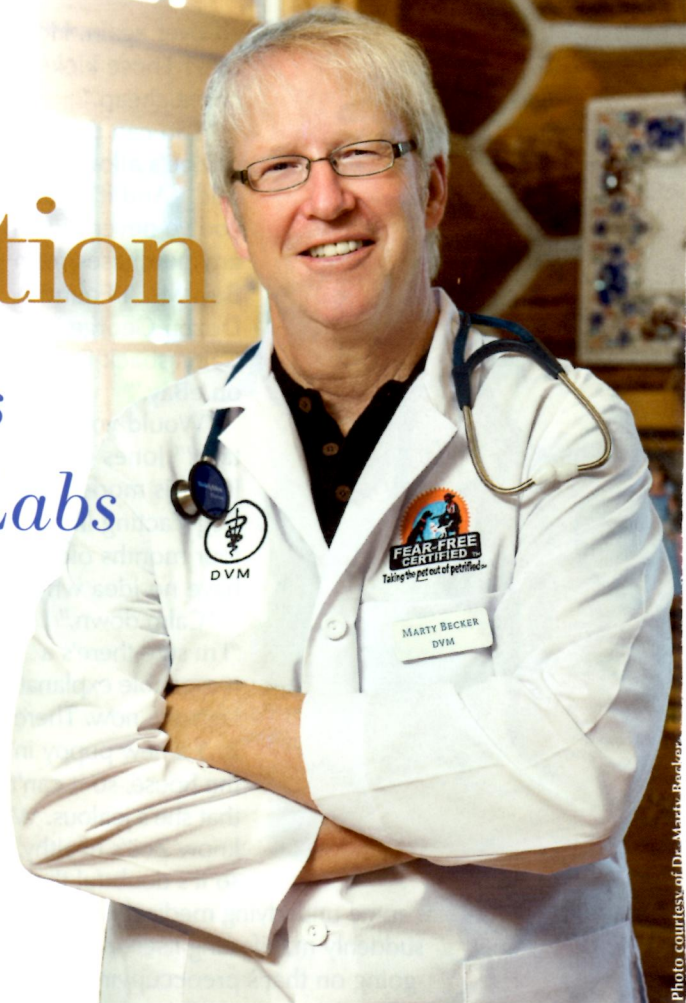
by Jen Reeder

**D**ebby Trinen's black Lab, Joy, had the zest for life so common in Labs – she loved to swim and lead the way on hikes. But her playful nature led to many emergency trips to the veterinarian when she was a puppy, which made her terrified of any visit to the animal hospital, even for routine exams. “She was a very brave dog,” Trinen says. “But when it came time to go the vet, oh! The shaking and the eyes dilating and the backing into the corner – it was horrible.”

Then in the summer of 2013, Trinen got a life-changing phone call from her local veterinarian. She learned that Dr. Marty Becker, the resident veterinary expert on *Good Morning America* known as “America’s Veterinarian,” was back home in Sandpoint, Idaho. He’d heard about Joy and wanted to see if she’d benefit from the “Fear Free” techniques he was developing for veterinary professionals.

“I was extremely apprehensive because I was like, ‘What’s going to happen here?’ When we first walked into the same exam room that Joy had been in many times, she backed herself into the corner just like she did every time,” remembers Trinen.

Meanwhile, Dr. Becker and his daughter Mikkel, a dog trainer, calmly sat on the floor on the other side of the room and “just started talking and throwing treats out.” Within four minutes, Joy walked over to Dr. Becker. “She wasn’t shaking – she was wagging her tail and eating the treats and Marty started doing an exam on her,” Trinen recalls. “It made a major difference.”



Dr. Marty Becker

Watson gets a frozen peanut butter cup as a high reward treat to help lower his stress during handling.

Photo courtesy of Blum Animal Hospital





While Joy was one of the first Labs in America to benefit from Fear Free handling techniques, she's certainly not the last. More than 20,000 veterinary professionals have registered to become Certified Fear Free Professionals since Dr. Becker launched the program on March 31, 2016. The concept is simple but revolutionary: focus not only on the physical health of a pet, but on the emotional well-being as well.

"When a puppy comes in for the first time, they're wiggling with delight," Dr. Becker says. "But we start making mistakes right off the bat. So I thought, 'How do you reduce the triggers or remove the triggers of fear, anxiety, and stress?'"

Inspired by a speech by Dr. Karen Overall about the negative impacts of fear on the brain, Dr. Becker assembled an advisory team of veterinary behaviorists to help develop Fear Free handling techniques. Veterinary professionals can take eight online classes to learn the methods, such as offering special treats (think: frozen peanut butter cups and turkey hot dogs) during injections, performing examinations on the floor instead of on an elevated table, spraying instruments with pheromones, and using gentle restraint. As a result, pets are less likely to hide pain and sensitivity during exams, blood chemistries are more accurate – and blood pressures are lower – and digestive upset doesn't occur.

Dr. Becker, who grew up with a black Lab named Luke and a yellow Lab named Sam, says Labs are a "resilient" breed, so they can hide their stress well. But tell-tale signs of anxiety include yawning, shaking as though they're drying off after a swim, and salivating more than normal. He hopes Fear Free professionals will help prevent these signs from appearing in patients at animal hospitals.

"Almost all Labs are going to have ear infections, so it makes sense to start conditioning a Lab puppy to have their ears handled," he says. "Here's a recent example with a Lab puppy: On his first visit, we let him sniff the otoscope, which we'd wiped with a pheromone wipe, then gave him a treat. Then we hold the otoscope by his ear and treat. Then we insert the otoscope – actually touch the ear, and treat... so when I saw him for his second visit, as soon as he saw the otoscope, his tail started wagging so hard it would lift alternate back feet off the ground. That's what you want. He's going to be conditioned to think that this is positive."



PHOTO COURTESY OF BLUM ANIMAL HOSPITAL

Watson with an Adaptil bandana on to help with weighing on the scale.

**K**athryn Primm, DVM and owner of Applebrook Animal Hospital in Ooltewah, Tennessee, was the first veterinarian in America to become a Certified Fear Free Professional, which she says helped grow her practice "in the best possible way." Labs make up a large portion of her patients.

"Labs are wonderful," she says. "They are the ones that tend to respond well to treats, and they are smart and well-trained – usually – so I can often ask them to do tricks as a distraction. Labs like toys, too."

She keeps a variety of toys, treats, aromatherapy scents, pheromones, and soft mats in exam rooms for her patients. In a recent success story, she met with a black Lab mix adopted as a stray who was terrified by the prospect of a bath. So she coaxed him toward the tub with a line of squeeze cheese along the floor, then simply sponged him off so that he didn't have to endure a frightening experience. She can try an actual bath at the next visit.





## Dr. Marty Becker's Enrichment Tips for Labs

Fear Free Happy Homes isn't just about reducing fear, anxiety, and stress, it's also about increasing enrichment activities at home. As Dr. Marty Becker says, "Labs aren't meant to be retired. They need a job." Some of his tips for increasing their mental stimulation include:

- Use food puzzles and interactive feeders instead of dinner bowls
- Freeze canned dog food in a toy like a Kong
- Scatter kibble in the grass so your Lab can hunt for it
- Play retrieving games
- Teach your dog new tricks
- Practice scent training

Remember to use low-calorie treats or small portions to avoid weight gain. "You know a Lab can easily become a 'flabrador retriever,'" he jokes. "A reward can also be a physical pat, like a scratch on the neck or the chest wall or the base of the tail. Or just play."

Dr. Primm has cared for each of Sherri Turner's four Labs, including her current black Lab, Boone. Turner said her veterinarian's excellent care got even better with Fear Free certification. "Since implementing Fear Free, I kid her and say, 'When I bring Boone here, he drags me to get in

Dr. Marty Becker with Bali and a squeeze-cheesed name!

the door,'" Turner shares with a laugh. "There's absolutely no hesitation, no fear. He doesn't dread going, and I don't dread taking him."


It's a sentiment increasingly shared by Lab lovers across the country. Cari Setzler, DVM, took her yellow Lab, Watson, to Blum Animal Hospital in Chicago to get a second opinion about his neurological condition. She was immediately impressed by the Fear Free techniques the staff used to calm her excitable dog, such as tying a bandana soaked in pheromones around Watson's neck as soon as he arrived.

"Within five to seven minutes of having it on, his body started to relax," she says. "By the time we walked into the exam room, he was listening much better and was focused more on myself, the technician, and the veterinarian. Then they continued with treats and appropriate body language... now to him, it's a reward to get to go there."

Now the Fear Free movement is expanding beyond animal hospitals. Fear Free Happy Homes recently launched to help pet owners provide positive experiences through enrichment at home, followed soon by a program for animal shelters. (As Becker posited, "By next year, you'll have a pet adopted at a Fear Free Shelter that lives in a Fear Free Happy Home that goes to a Fear Free Veterinarian that is referred to Fear Free training, Fear Free boarding, Fear Free grooming, Fear Free end-of-life care...")

Natalie Marks, DVM and co-owner of Blum Animal Hospital, serves on the Fear Free advisory panel and is enthusiastic about current and future possibilities. "We want to make sure that we're educating owners that a Fear Free experience really starts at home," she says. "One part of our experience that I think benefits all dogs, especially Labs, who like to be with their owners, is to play classical music and music from a compilation called *Through a Dog's Ear*, which is just very soft, calming music... I always encourage owners to not listen to talk radio on the way to the veterinary office, but to cater to the dog and play soothing music in the car to start the experience off right."

One technique for Fear Free Happy Homes involves TTouch, a gentle, consistent way of touching dogs in non-sensitive areas starting at the shoulders, according to Dr. Marks. She encourages Lab lovers to talk to their veterinarian about any triggers of anxiety or stress for their dogs – whether it's nail trims, bathing, ear cleaning, car travel, thunderstorms, or "all of the above" – to help develop a Fear Free strategy to care for them at home.

"That's the whole goal: to keep your bond with your Lab as fear-free and as stress-free and as anxiety-free as possible at all times during the day," she says. "The whole point of having this wonderful breed in your home is to have that exceptional human-animal bond and to enrich your life." 

For more information, visit: [FearFreePets.com](http://FearFreePets.com) or [FearFreeHappyHomes.com](http://FearFreeHappyHomes.com).