

Special Needs of Primates Showing Signs of Psychological Distress

Primates may develop abnormal behaviors when their environment does not promote psychological well-being.



These behaviors may stem from inadequacies in the animal's current environment or be a long-term result of past problems.

Either way, it takes special care and attention to meet the needs of these animals. The behaviors are often persistent and are difficult to resolve once they have started.



ABNORMAL BEHAVIORS TO LOOK FOR

Behaviors that may be a sign of psychological distress include:

- repetitive circling, pacing, somersaulting, or similar movements
- chewing or licking constantly at enclosure bars or other objects
- star-gazing
- body rocking, head shaking
- inappropriate screaming fits
- frequent self-hugging
- huddling and appearing depressed or frightened
- excessive scratching or picking at their own skin
- eating their own feces or vomit, drinking their own urine
- biting, chewing, slapping, or poking at self
- inappropriate fear and avoidance reactions
- bizarre postures and habits

ONE BEHAVIOR, MANY REASONS

Every primate is different, and each case is unique. You could have primates showing similar abnormal behavior—but in response to very different stressors. Using one approach to manage similarly appearing behaviors likely will not work in all cases. Instead, it is best to find out the underlying cause of psychological distress, if possible, and then target your attention to treat the cause.

PRACTICAL TIP



You can not help them if you do not recognize that there is a problem. A process to monitor behavior is key in identifying primates with signs of psychological distress. Promptly recognizing abnormal behavior helps these animals get the special attention they need.

Monitoring the impact of approaches used to resolve the abnormal behavior is also important and helps you to make timely adjustments if they are not working.

DID YOU KNOW?

Primates may also show some of these behaviors when injured or sick. Your veterinarian can help rule out any underlying physical causes.

Getting Expert Help

A primate behaviorist or veterinarian with formal training and experience in primate behavior can be a vital resource. They can help you identify the underlying cause of your primate's behavior and effective management strategies for psychological distress.

This Animal Care Aid is part of a series developed to help with promoting psychological well-being in primates. Topics covered in the series include social grouping, supporting species-typical activities, and special considerations.

Questions? Email us at CenterforAnimalWelfare@usda.gov

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

Animal Care • AC-18-013

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

Issued October 2018 • Reviewed February 2024

