

MENTAL vs MEDICAL
SMALL FACILITY, LARGE IMPACT , CREATIVE STRATEGY FOR EXPANDING AND
IMPLEMENTING ANIMAL HUSBANDRY WITH LIMITED RESOURCES.

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Onmega Dolphin Park is located in Marmaris, Turkey. It is a natural environment dolphinarium that currently houses a population consisting of five Bottlenose Dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*), two of them females and three males of various ages and training levels. Each animal clearly displayed several undesired conducts e.g strong refusal and avoidance especially towards previously trained husbandry behaviors due previous aversive conditioning stimuli record.

For the last 4 years, every member of the training team pursued the same goal trying to increase the welfare of our animals using positive conditioning techniques to retrain the dolphins consistently. The main challenge was the lack of consistent effectiveness in required husbandry practices and a Preventative Medical Training Program (PMTP).

We mainly focused in the development of trust based bonds among the population and with the trainers, introducing a strong socialization program as well as increasing the positive association of the training team members, achieving a high comfort level while performing husbandry behavior training and during procedures in real situations. This allowed us to concentrate all efforts in our PMTP methods, implementing solid desensitization and trust foundation mentioned below:

- 1) Extinguish aversive responses while working on generalized positive stimulus.
- 2) Extensive desensitization of a wide variety of stimulus.
- 3) Decrease or avoid physical manipulation.
- 4) Train 100 % voluntary responses
- 5) Avoid involuntary sampling or medical treatment.
- 6) Teach all necessary PMTP behaviors to every member of the population.
- 7) Keep “positive notes” with successful reinforcers and use redirection techniques.
- 8) Set the animal to succeed, looking to elicit proactive responses due the use of positive training techniques.

As a result we experienced success when observed the animal’s willingness to cooperate increasing, giving the trainers the chance to acquire knowledge teaching basic and advanced medical behaviors with consistent response and solid criteria, extinguishing behavioral problems such as avoidance, refusal and aversion, despite aspects such as age, level of conditioning or character of the individual.

Through our PMTP we diminished the stress levels of the animals allowing us to complete a variety of voluntary medical behaviors such as samplings, ultrasounds, endoscopies, intramuscular injections and esophagus tactile exploration, or complex procedures such as a full voluntary insemination process, in addition to increase the Staff’s safety avoiding the use of nets during maneuvers and in stead handling them with a voluntary stranding. The implementation of this program led us to become the first facility in Turkey to have an exceptional PMTP and allows for the setting of guidelines and standards for other facilities within Turkey and Russia.