



Working with Fearful Bunnies

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Who are we?

Empowered Animals Behavior and Training

- Force free, positive reinforcement-based behavior consulting for all species
- Provide empowerment training for animals and their guardians
- Specialize in bunnies!
- Online behavior consultations, group classes, webinars, staff training



Learning Objectives

- What is fearful behavior?
- How to recognize fearful body language in rabbits
- How does fear serve rabbits?
- How to utilize enrichment to build confidence
- How to build a healthy trust account with your rabbit
- How to establish a low-stress husbandry routine
- Strategies for creating prosocial behavior towards humans



No Good Deed Goes Unpunished...





How does Fear Serve Rabbits

- Rabbits survive through the use of escape-avoidance behaviors.
- Hypervigilance and being overly cautious (in our human opinion!) helps keep a bunny alive.
- Constant hypervigilance over life in a home (human interactions, noises, etc.) can lead to chronic stress, which can have negative impacts on physical health as well as psychological well-being.



Conditioned Emotional Responses

- Conditioned emotional response (CER):
“A type of conditioned response in which an emotional response such as fear, anger, or happiness is elicited by a conditioned stimulus in the process of respondent conditioning.”
(Miltenberger, 2008)
- How does your bunny feel when they see you coming?
- That’s why you’re here!



What Does Fear Look Like?

2 Categories of Behavior

-Distance-INCREASING: Objective is to increase rabbit's distance between itself and stimulus

-Distance-DECREASING: Objective is to decrease rabbit's distance between itself and stimulus



Recognizing Fearful Bunny Body Language

- Whites of eyes showing
- Ears laid back
- Ears held stiffly back with tips angled down
- Ear insides facing body
- Ears swiveling around
- Tense tail


- Body weight on hind end
- Leaning away from something
- Holding breath
- Hard breathing
- Nose suddenly not twitching
- Eyes darting
- Freezing/not moving
- Scrunched up body



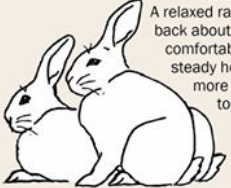
Behaviour: What Your Rabbit is Feeling

By Tamsin Stone www.theRabbitHouse.com

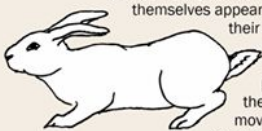
Curious 🟢🟡🟣
Curious rabbits cup their ears towards what they are exploring, twitch their nose rapidly and lean or stretch forwards to get a better look. They move slowly, creeping on tiptoes, instead of hopping.



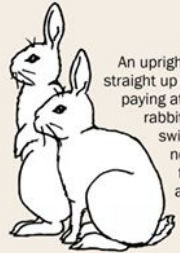
Relaxed 🟢🟡🟣
A relaxed rabbit will rest their ears back about 45 degrees, sit or lay comfortably and move with a steady hop. When napping, the more difficult the position is to get up from, the more relaxed they are.




Aggressive 🟢🟡🟣
A rabbit ready to attack will try to make themselves appear bigger by raising their body, chin and tail. Their ears are folded and pointed back over their shoulders. They move forward in quick dashes, often growling!




Alert 🟢🟡🟣
An upright posture and ears pointed straight up mean your rabbit is alert and paying attention to something. Alert rabbits freeze in position, but may swivel their ears and twitch their nose rapidly. They are ready to flee (or head for the treat jar) as soon as they work out what is going on.




Sleepy 🟢🟡🟣
When rabbits are napping, and not paying any attention to their surroundings, they lay down, stop twitching their nose and rest their ears back on their body.




Nervous 🟢🟡🟣
A nervous rabbit will lean or turn away from the threat, crouch down to make themselves harder to spot, but still be ready to run. Their ears are folded and pointed back, they may freeze, bolt for cover or turn aggressive if cornered.




EAR DIRECTION
Rabbits have great hearing, and can rotate their ears independently. Their ears are also a quick guide to how they feel: forward - curious, upright - alert, backwards 45° - relaxed, laid back further - nervous or aggressive.



BODY POSTURE
A rabbit's posture, the way they sit or stand, is a big clue to what they are thinking - particularly for lops who don't move their ears much. Rabbits lean forwards to investigate and lean away from scary things.



LOCOMOTION
Pay attention to changes in normal hopping motion. They go faster when excited or running away, and slower when being cautious. Cautious or scared rabbits also keep their body closer to the ground when moving.



Signs of Stress in Rabbits

- Retracting head
- Stopping while eating
- Quickly turning head, as if trapped
- Swiveling ears
- Crouching
- Running around cage with no direction
- Whites of eyes showing
- Third eyelid exposed
- Thumping
- Crouching with ears folded-trying to appear small
- Freezing
- Darting
- Screaming

Signs of Aggression In Rabbits

- Ears folded back
- Insides of ears facing back
- Standing up on all fours-trying to appear big
- Head lunges (motion of lunging, just with head)
- Lunging
- Growling
- Boxing with front paws



Escalating from Stress to Fear to Aggression

How Can We Help?

- Behavior is communication.
- Respect a bunny's wishes!
- When rabbits recognize that their lesser signals are being responded to, there is less of a need to respond with a more overt and potentially emotional response.



Why Can't They Just "Get Used To It?"

- **Flooding**-a technique in behavior therapy in which the individual is exposed directly to a maximum-intensity anxiety-producing situation or stimulus, either described or real, without any attempt made to lessen or avoid anxiety or fear during the exposure.
- Flooding in humans is done by *consent*. Rabbits cannot consent.
- You are paired with the aversive stimulus and the coercion of the situation.



-American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology

Why Can't They Just "Get Used To It?"

Learned helplessness-

A phenomenon in which repeated exposure to uncontrollable stressors results in individuals failing to use any control options that may later become available.

- a motivational deficit characterized by a failure to respond when challenged with further aversive events
- an associative deficit characterized by impairment of learning from successful coping, and
- an emotional deficit characterized by apparent underreactivity to painful events—**although later research revealed by assaying corticoid levels that the animals were very stressed.**



-American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology

Let's Talk Strategies!



Relationship Bank Account

- Think of your relationship with your bunny like a bank
- We can make deposits and withdrawals with our interactions
- Our goal is to have more deposits
- Only take withdrawals when necessary
- If we have a build up of deposits, the withdrawals don't have a significant impact- quicker rebound

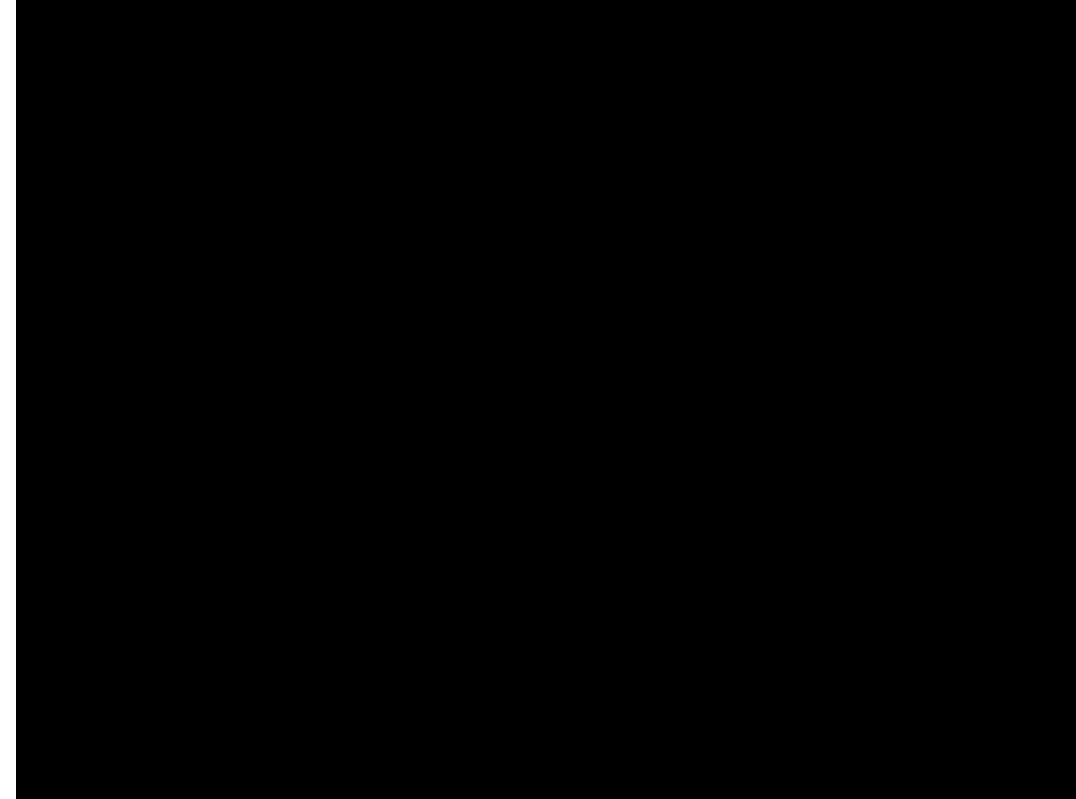


Relationship Account

Withdrawal (Negative- bunnies may not like)	Deposit (Positive- bunnies like)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Picking up- Chasing- Petting- Grooming (from humans)- Stepping into pen	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Food- Hay- Enrichment- Free roam time- New objects in pen

First Things First: Establishing Low- Stress Husbandry

- We have to ensure that our husbandry practices are not scaring our rabbit
- How can we care for our bunnies while minimizing their stress?
- Observe: do they move away from you during your husbandry routine?
- Provide plenty of space
- Example: Provide a big treat on the other side of the pen when reaching in to change their water



Creating a Routine

- Create a routine!
- Predictable routines allow your shy bunny to know *what* is going to happen, *when* it's going to happen, and *how* it's going to happen.
- When our rabbits have all of this information, they have more control over how to respond.



Passive Strategies

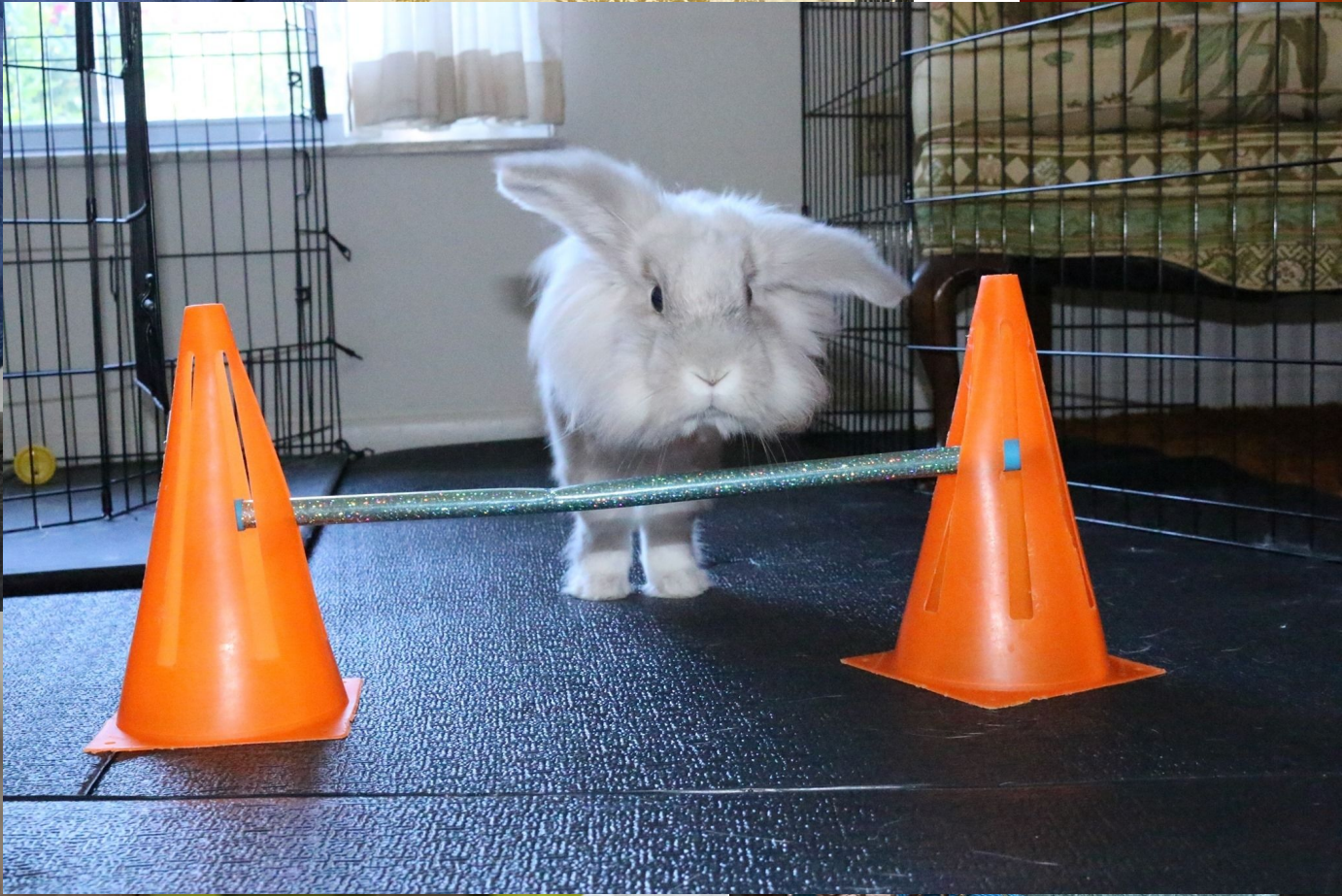
- Enrichment
- Hands-off approach
- Becoming a good listener
- Passive bonding (habituation)
- Drive-by treating



What is Environmental Enrichment?

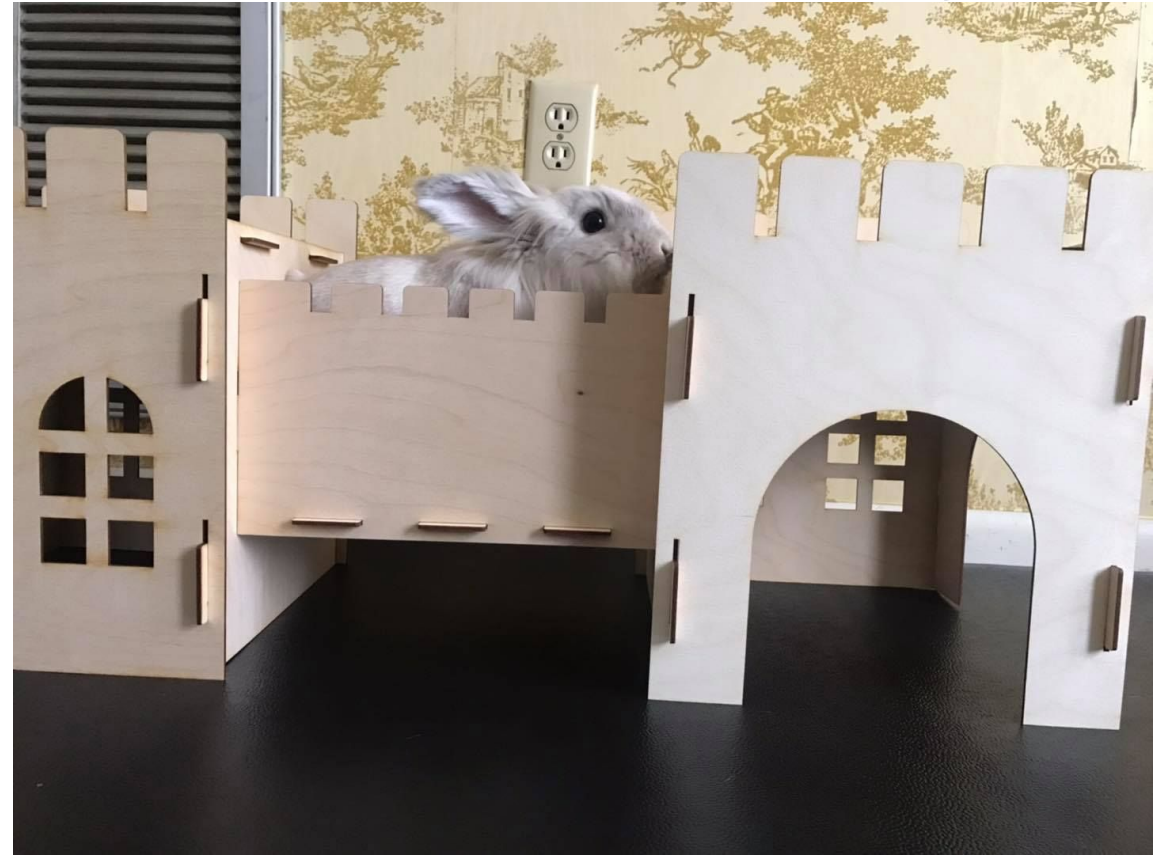
Environmental enrichment is changing an animal's environment in a way that improves the animal's quality of life through mental stimulation.





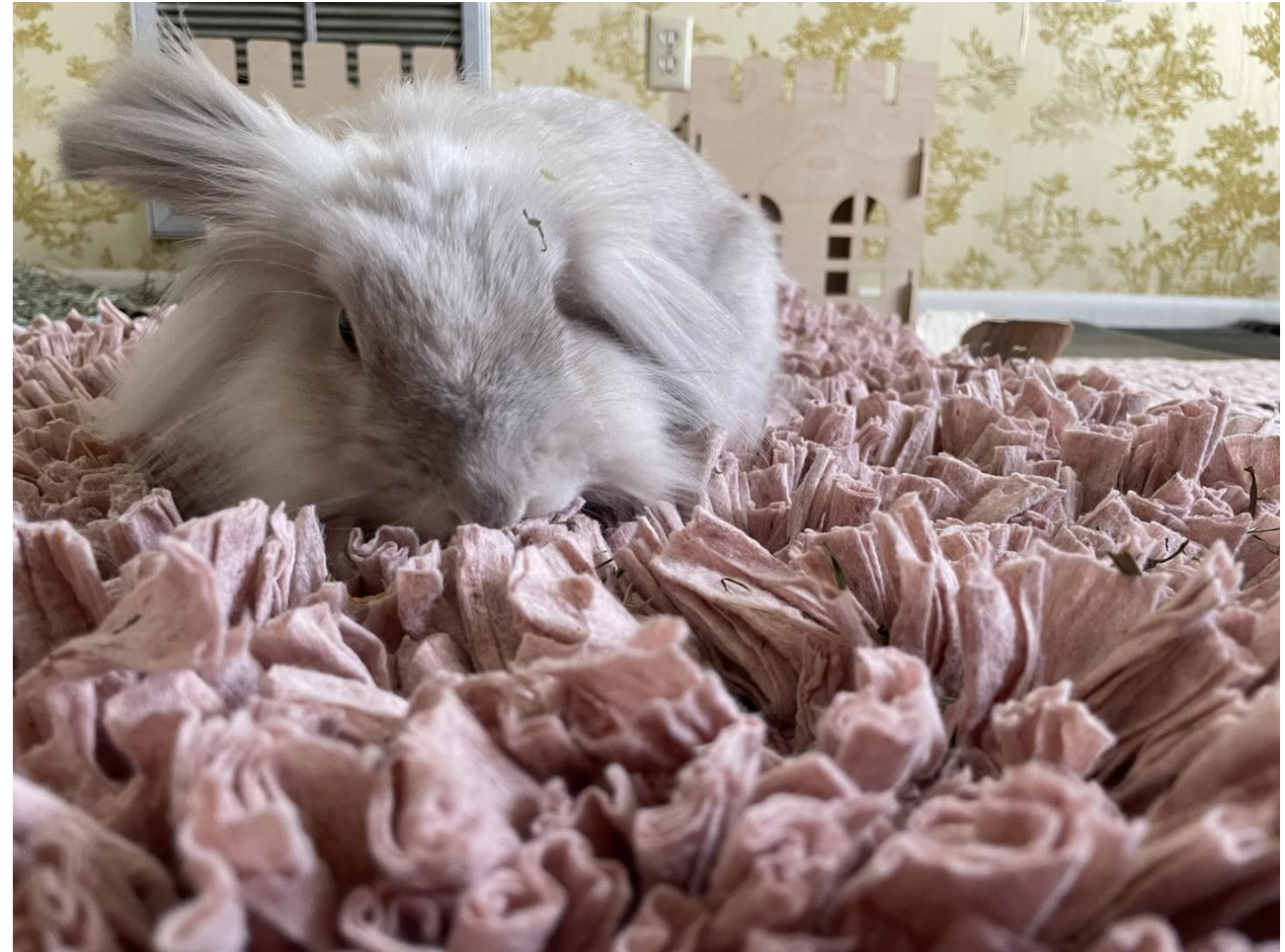
How does it Benefit Rabbits?

- Improves physiological and psychological well being
- Promotes more diverse behavior (foraging, digging, pushing, searching for food)
- Frequent pairing of new stimuli with something positive
- Rabbit makes choices and is reinforced for acting on the environment
- Promotes novel sensory stimulation



The Benefit of Nosework

- Research shows us that the seeking part of the brain is incompatible with the fear part of the brain
- We can use this to our advantage!
- Snuffle mats, foraging trays/ bags etc.



Hands- Off Approach

- When working to establish ourselves more positively, it helps to remove all negative interactions (perceived)
- We eliminate withdrawals and focus on only making deposits
- We see the bunny start to move towards us on their terms
- Committing to a hands-off approach is the quickest way to eliminate unintentional withdrawals



Passive Bonding (Habituation)

- Simply sitting in a place your bunny is comfortable with you being and not attempting interaction
- In or outside of the pen- depending on bunny's comfort
- Avoid moving towards your bunny or trying to entice them to come near you
- The goal is for them to get used to your presence and learn you are predictable



Drive-by Treating (Pairing)

- Keep a cookie jar near your bunny's pen
- Drop treats any time you walk by them
- The goal is to associate your presence with treats falling from the sky
- They will learn to anticipate treats when you approach and move towards you when they see you coming, then you reinforce that-strengthening the behavior.



Active Strategies

- Protected Contact Feeding
- Approach exercise
- Consent testing
- Clicker training



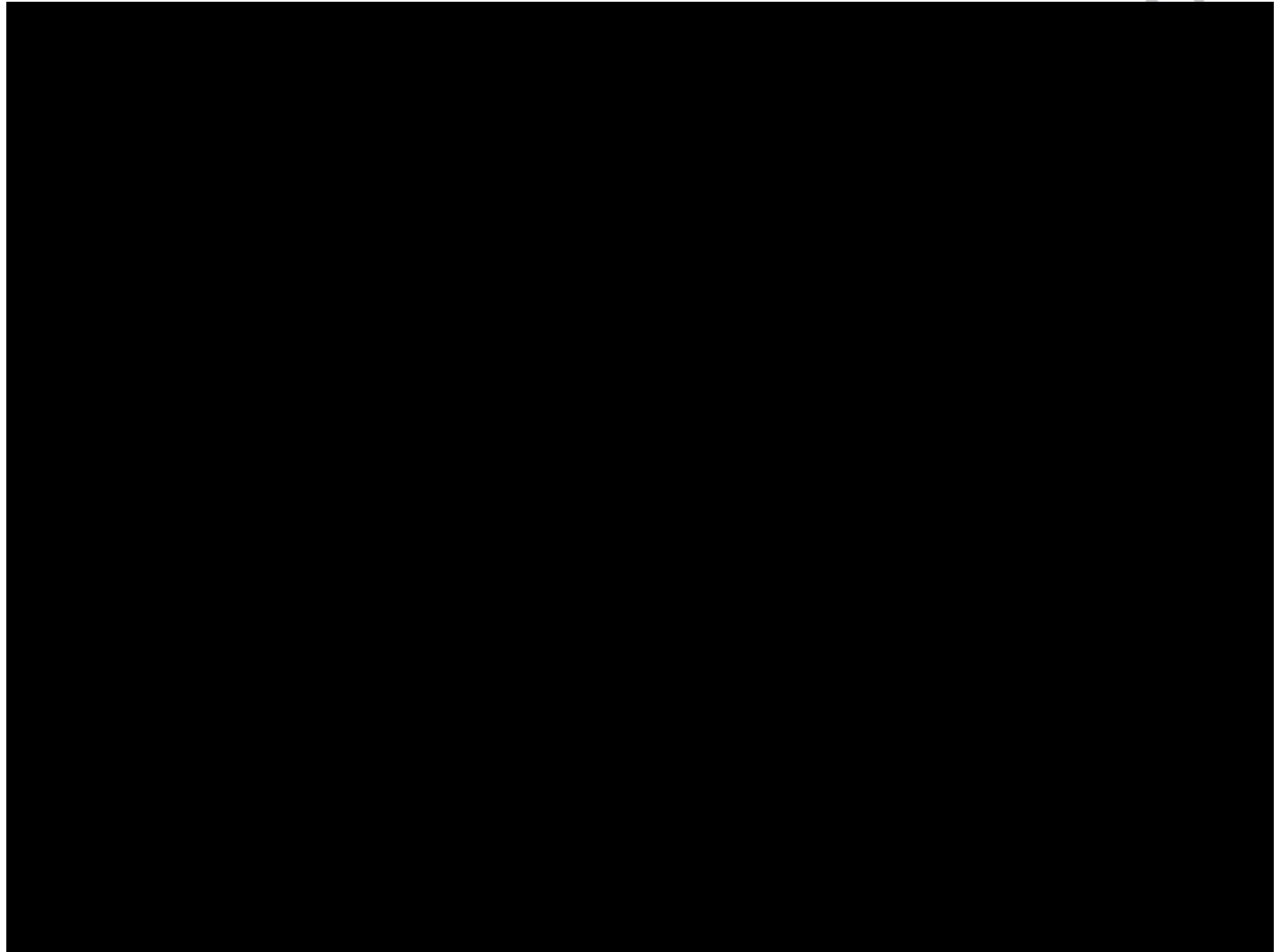
Protected Contact

- Protected contact (PC) means your interaction takes place through a barrier.
- This allows the bunny a greater feeling of safety.



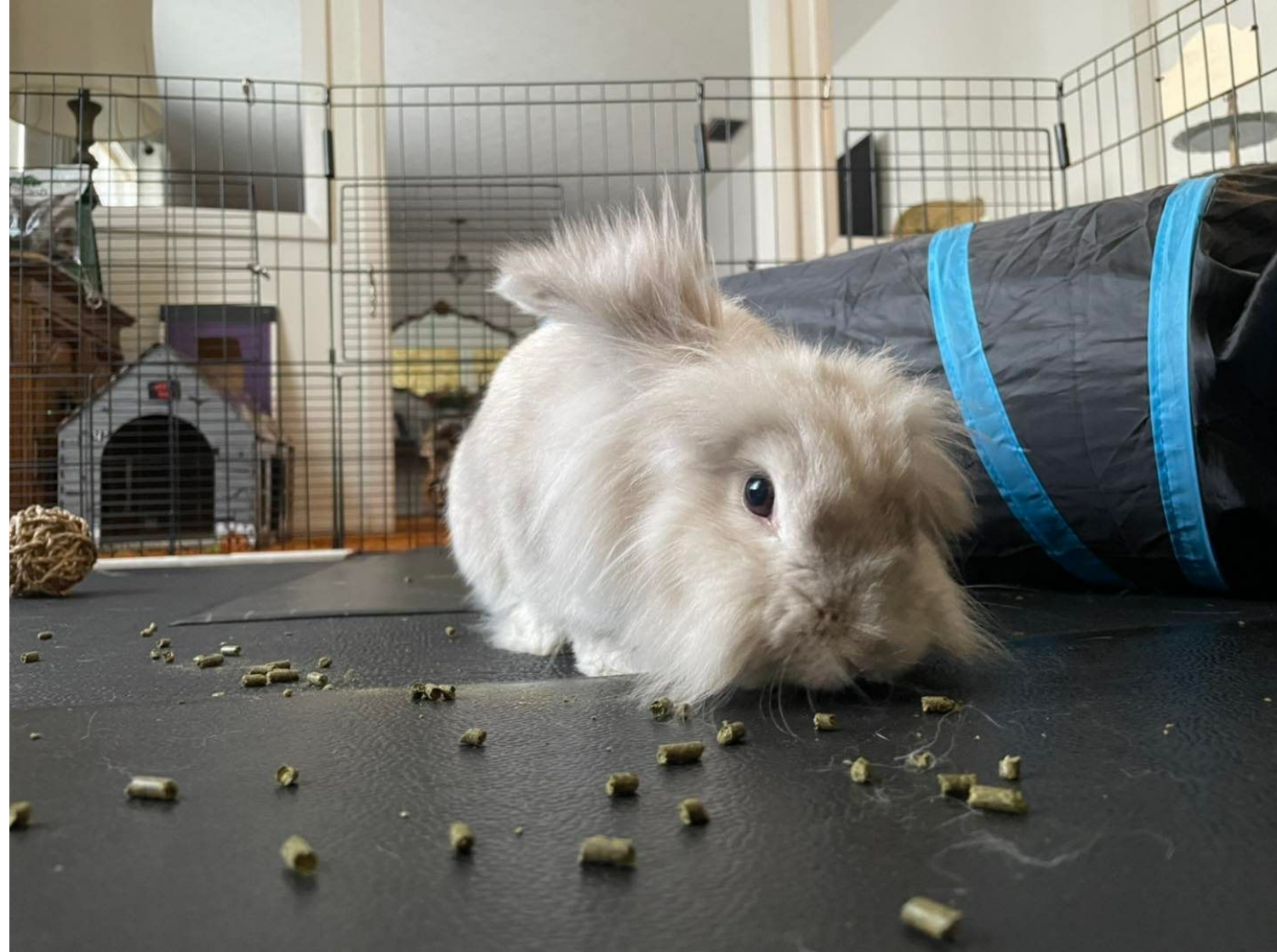
Approach Exercise

- Grab a small amount of treats
- Sit in your bunny's area
- Offer a treat any time they come over



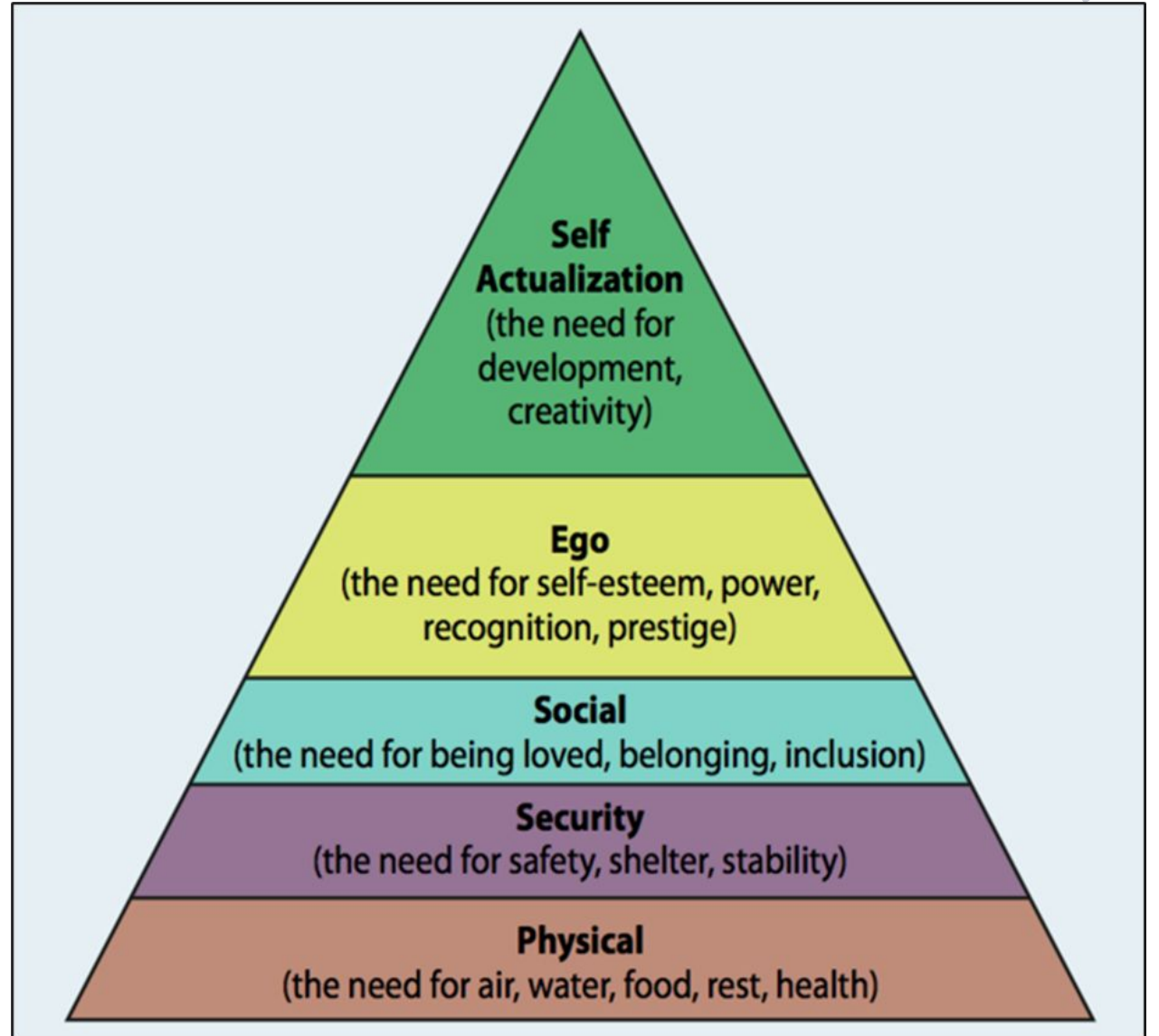
Treat Delivery

- “But my bunny doesn’t like treats.”
- *Reinforcement* is the process of delivering the *reinforcer* to the animal.
- Often, the reinforcement scares the bunny, and the reinforcer is not worth it!



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

- Our rabbits often are not starving to the point of *needing* to interact with us.
- So, we operate at the safety level.



Consent Test

- Create “if-then” sequence
- Offer your hand
- If your bunny offers X behavior in response, then pet
- If your bunny does *anything else*, take it as a “no” and remove your hand
- Pet only twice, then ask again



Clicker Training

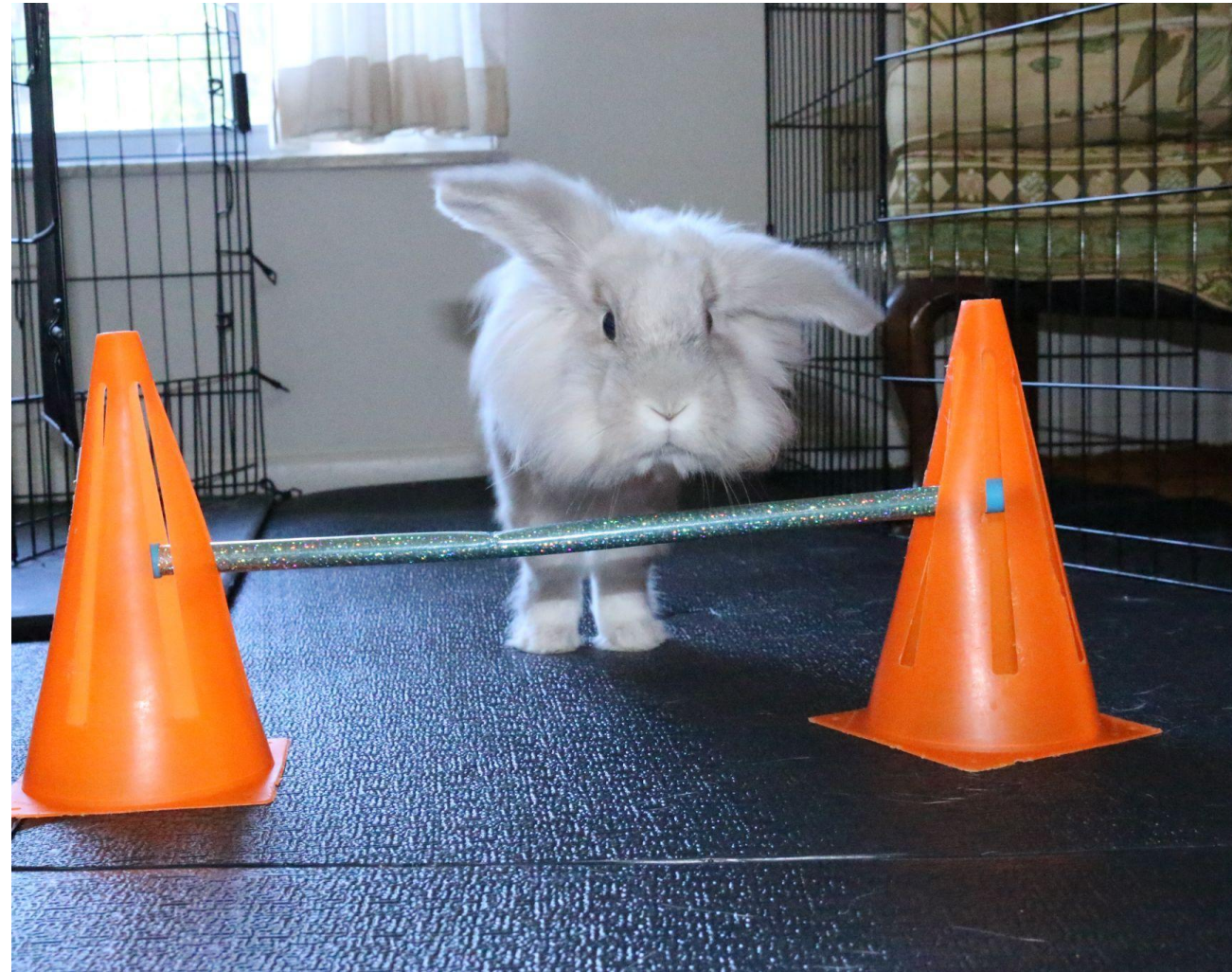
- Positive reinforcement training has been demonstrated to be an animal's preferred form of enrichment
- Clicker training is a popular training technique that leverages the science of behavior to effectively communicate with your pet



Clicker Training

Benefits:

- Confidence building
- Choice
- Control
- Communication
- Relationship building





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Key Takeaways

- Fearful behavior is *normal* for rabbits, but can interfere with quality of life
- Establishing yourself as safe and trustworthy is key to building a strong foundation to your relationship
- It's never too late to change behavior
- We can change the way that rabbits feel about us on an emotional level
- We are here to help!



Where Do We Go from Here?

Step 1: Implement the hands-off approach

Step 2: Start observing your bunny's body language

Step 3: Balance your trust account

Step 4: Establish a low-stress husbandry routine

Step 5: Select 1 passive strategy to start today



Questions?

Contact us:

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