

Feline Stress in the Shelter & How Daily Enrichment Can Reduce Feline Stress

The shelter environment is one of the worst places for a cat to be housed. This is due to factors listed below. However, there are ways that we can help them adjust and decrease the amount of stress that they are trying to cope with. What may not be stressful to us, can be stressful to them. Cats are sensory driven, “creatures” of habit...they thrive on routine, and they do not like change. Be dedicated to gentle approach, calm interactions, and soft voice.

There are some important things to remember when providing daily care, setting up a cage, approaching and petting, or handling a cat in your care.

- Sounds matters – cats are very susceptible to noise levels. Their sense of hearing is higher than ours and also higher than dogs. Keeping the noise level low, will reduce that stimuli. Cats are able to hear in the range of 64-80kHz. In addition, when they can hear other cats in distress they will also be in distress.
 - Vision matters – cats have motion sensitive vision. We want to reduce the amount of visual stimulation, especially when they first arrive. Ways we do this is by ensuring we don't place visibly stressed, shy, or somewhat combative cats in high traffic areas or areas where they will be forced to see us walking past them frequently. Example would be, not placing a visibly stressed or a shy cat in the lower condos in Cattery that face the Kennel side. This will present many people and dogs passing very frequently in front of them. Ensure a hiding space for every cat, this gives them a choice to tuck away from stimuli they need to “shut out”. Flooding can occur when not provided the option to hide. Selecting an appropriate location for the cat is a big way to reduce stress. Also, do not place direct eye contact with a cat.
 - Smell matters – cats have 67 million scent receptors! Smelling other cats can be very stressful. Perfumes, lotions, and air fresheners should always be avoided. These can stress cats out. This is one reason that we also recommend non-scented litter. Cats can have an aversion to these smells because they irritate their nasal passages. Smelling other cats can place an otherwise very sweet cat on the defense. Avoiding unnecessary odors will keep stress levels down. In addition, Feliway pheromones and other calming aids are highly recommended for use in every room a cat is housed. Diffusers plug right into the wall. If spray is used on a blanket or toy, wait 10 minutes before presenting to the cat to ensure that any alcohol has dissipated. I recommend the use of Feliway to every cat owner. Scent enrichment is very important to a cat. Cats react to different scents, and not every cat will react to the same scent. Most people will only think of catnip as an option. However there are other scents that cats can enjoy. These are: Valerian (can also have lasting calming affect), lavender, vanilla, coffee, silvervine, almond, and some cats enjoy rosemary, oregano, and parsley. Essential oils can be dangerous so always let people know to check with their Veterinarian if they have an oil diffuser.
- Also, a cat's belongings should stay with them as long as they are not soiled with feces or vomit. Cats are comforted by familiar things and this means the things that smell like them. The blanket that they have laid on, the washcloth on their cage that they rub against, their soft toys, and their scratching option all have their own smell on them and should remain with them. Upon adoption send familiar items with the adopter.

- Touch matters – for a cat, touch is invasive and can be quite scary. Cats can have petting limits and petting zones. One myth is that every cat likes to be held. This is not true and we should never try to pick a cat up without invitation. When going to pet a cat, start with a closed hand and slowly present your closed hand to the cat to smell. If the cat smells your hand and rubs against your hand, open your hand to continue the pet. If the cat smells your hand and retreats, the cat is not ready to be pet. When petting, it is important to remember the most vulnerable area on a cat is their belly. Petting a cat's belly without invitation is a chance on being bit. In addition, the base of the tail is a sensitive area and not every cat likes their hind end petted. Some cat's do enjoy it and will present with what is called "elevator butt". It is important to respect each cat's petting boundaries and wishes. Remind yourself and potential adopters that it is "ok" for a cat to not want to be picked up, have a belly rub, or like being pet for more the 3-4 strokes. Petting limits are common. It is very important not to push a cat's limits and to stop petting them after 3-4 strokes before it may get to the point of over stimulation.
- Choice matters – without options for choice, a cat cannot have proper stress responses or coping ability. By providing a cat with a hiding spot, you have allowed that cat to be visible on his/her terms. The duration and severity of the stress matters and by providing hiding options, we can reduce both of these for the cat. Providing the cat a choice in interacting is also necessary and how they prefer to interact. A cat should be able to have a choice in interacting, hiding, and engaging. Everything is on their terms and we are here to provide love and care, and help provide them the ability to acclimate.

Defining Stress

Stress can occur anytime a cat feels frustrated, anxious, or afraid.

- Frustration – emotion attributed to external factors that are beyond a cat's control, or an unfulfilled need.
- Anxiety – a state of apprehension, uncertainty, or anticipation of an event (like someone opening the cage door, daily medication, unpredictable circumstance).
- Fear – Adaptive emotion, perceived as real danger.

All 3 are triggers in a shelter environment.

Stress Responses – The Five "F"'s

- Fight – defensive, combative
- Flight – escape,
- Fidget – extreme restlessness, sometimes seems "cage crazy"
- Freeze – frozen in fear
- Feign – fake sleep, not actually resting and shut down

Quick note on food and water bowls – whisker fatigue is a stressor. Ensure that cats are provided shallow food bowls and always "fluff" wet food. Cat's do not bite their food, they need to be able to use their tongue to get food into their mouth. If a cats bowl is too small or deep for their face it can be a "fight" for them to get their food out and can also cause whisker fatigue.

Enrichment To Combat Stress

Feline enrichment in a shelter setting is more than placing a catnip toy or a few treats in their kennels each day. Enrichment provides psychological well being.

*** a stressed cat is a sick cat***

Reducing the stress and providing a variety of enrichment will reduce illness.

Enrichment should provide:

- stimulation of the brain
- allow for species typical behavior – foraging/scratching/pouncing/using their nose,etc.
- relief and distraction
- add quality to their space
- opportunity for play

* pacing through cage is boredom*

Visual Enrichment

- bird feeders on lobby room windows
- cat tv for approximately 10-15 minutes for cats that don't have a window watching option.
- mobiles that hang from above
- motion toys like hot pursuit and the flutter fly. Run for 1 cycle in view of the cats. They can watch from their kennels.
- lava lamp in view of the cats or turn lights off and turn on the stars projector
- flutter a feather wand toy around the room, as naturally as possible.

Sounds Enrichment

- Relax My Cat music
- David Teie music, with purring
- bird sounds - for short duration
- reading aloud to a cat, especially a shy cat

Scent Enrichment

- toys infused with various scents previously listed.
- Silvervine chew sticks
- scents can be placed on paper balls, soft toys, cotton balls

Foraging – using their nose

- treats hidden in a paper ball
- treats in a treat egg
- food puzzle
- take an empty shallow kleenex box and place treats inside it, then add different textures of small balls. It becomes a puzzle and they have to work to get the treats out.
- Bottle caps with a dollop of tuna
- providing cat grass

*** foraging is a natural behavior for a cat. Pawing at food or water is not anything to “correct”. Also, burying their food is a natural instinct. In the same way they bury their outputs in a litter box. Naturally, cats will do these behaviors so they do not attract unwanted visitors to their safe space. If an adopter does like that their cat buries their food, I recommend that they pick up the food dish after the cat has completed a meal and then offer food again at scheduled

times each day. In addition, elevated food bowls are WONDERFUL for cats who bury or forage their food and water. Again...totally normal thing for a cat do.

Touch Enrichment

- Zoom groom
- different textures: carpet remnant, cardboard, sticks, leaves, etc
- during appropriate seasons, place leaves into a medium cardboard box and allow the cat to play & forage through it.
- Kittens enjoy being brushed by a toothbrush because it feels like mother's tongue

Food Enrichment

- tuna or wet food in a toilet paper roll
- egg carton, each space has a different flavor, type of treat or dollop of food
- lickable treat sticks
- chicken baby food on a spoon

Play Time Enrichment

- interact with cat by using a cat dancer or wand toy (stays with the cat once used, not shared between cats)
- attach interesting toys, fleece strips, or other interactive items to the kennel doors using shower curtain rings
- tie a shoelace to the kennel door
- catnip bubbles, blow catnip bubbles in front of the kennel doors for cats to paw at and watch
- allow out of cage time when possible

Once you know what each cat enjoys, make a note of it so that other staff members and potential adopters will know.

Other important things to know about cats

- There is no such thing as a dominant cat. Behaviors that we see as dominant are misunderstood. A cats confidence can be misunderstood as dominance.
- Cats can become bored with their toys and so rotating a variety of toys every few weeks will help cats stay interested in independent playing.
- There are different types of play and it is important for adopters to learn what their cat enjoys. Each cat in a home can enjoy a different type of play. Variety is key.
- There are different personalities/types of cats - a tree dweller and a ground/bush dweller. A tree dweller type prefers high perches and climbing. They want to be above their environment to view everything around. They feel safest up high. Bush dwellers prefer staying low to the ground and enjoying places to tuck away. They feel safest staying in low lying areas, where they can hide or hunt.
- Cats need to be able to scratch. A home should have multiple scratching option of different textures and sizes. Cats need the ability to stretch while scratching. Cats can only regulate their mental wellbeing through their claws.
- Cats need a litter box option on each level of a home. They do not always like a covered box because they cannot use their peripheral vision. They feel vulnerable.