

Approach, Scruffing & Minimal Restraint Webinar Script

Hi. I'm Alana Stevenson. I've been professionally working with cats and resolving feline behavioral problems since 2004. Feline Fundamentals – Approach, Scruffing & Minimal Restraint is a brief introductory webinar touching on humane handling techniques and tips. If you would like to learn more about humane feline handling, take my two webinars Feline Fundamentals Humane Handling Basics 1 & 2. The link will be available and presented at the end of this webinar.

In order to approach cats correctly and positively interact with them, we first need to have a positive attitude about them. If you think of expressions used to refer to people who like cats, there is often a negative connotation or stigma – ‘crazy cat lady’ for instance. We often refer to cats negatively as well. Cats are called untrainable, aloof, nasty or mean. We tend not to have these same associations with dogs. To help cats and work with them gently, it's important to develop the right attitude. Don't label or refer to cats negatively or use words such as ‘mean,’ bad, ‘evil cat,’ ‘nasty cat,’ or ‘mad.’ If a cat is fearful, avoidant or aggressive, it's best to choose words that describe the cat's behaviors. Words like hissing, hiding, lunging, will not come out of the carrier or swatting explain what the cat is doing but do not negatively label or malign the cat. Do choose words such as frightened, afraid, avoidant or fearful.

How we approach cats can affect them, especially when a cat is concerned or uncertain. When handling a cat, it's important to approach cats from slightly behind or next to them. Avoid facing the cat directly or looming over the cat. Avoid staring directly at the cat. Instead, look at them and then avert your gaze. The handlers in these photos are behind, next to, or to the side of the cats while examining them.

When moving around cats, be quiet and calm. Do not make quick sudden movements or broad gestures. Speak softly around cats and move slowly and steadily. This video clip shows an excellent example of how to be calm and move slowly around cats, as well as how to speak softly and reassure the cat.

We should avoid scruffing. Scruffing unnecessarily creates fear and anxiety and stresses the cat. Scruffing cats can cause eye damage because it increases intraocular pressure which can contribute to eye issues such as glaucoma and cataracts. Scruffing can make the cat powerless, but this simply makes them more fearful of being handled in the future, which can make them much more aggressive or reactive. It increases the risk of injury to ourselves and cats.

In this video, a veterinarian, demonstrates how gentle ‘scruffing’ is unpleasant for her cat, Snowbell. Although it looks like she is pinching her kitty, she is only lightly touching her. Snowbell is an older cat and was a rescue with an unknown history. She is easily handled when people are gentle, but the moment she is even slightly scruffed, she cries, flinches and then tries to get away.

There is a term called ‘minimal restraint.’ This means when we handle cats we should only use the minimal amount of restraint necessary for you and the cat. To handle a cat gently, let the cat choose the position she is more comfortable in. If she prefers to lie down, do as much as you can with her in that position. If the cat prefers to stand, examine her while she is standing.

The cat’s body should be completely supported. This means that all four paws should be on a surface. If cats are tipped, tilted or off-balance, they will become frightened and try to right themselves. This often causes us to struggle to restrain them harder, which then makes them more uncomfortable and reactive.

Your hands and body should be positioned to gently support and control the cat’s movements.

It’s important when handling a cat to make sure the surface they are on is not loud, cold and slippery. Smooth, slippery surfaces such as metal and laminated tables provide no traction. Often this is why cats struggle when we handle them. Always place something soft under the cat. Use soft towels or rubber mats such as a cut yoga mat for the cat to stand or lie down on. It will make handling much easier for you and less stressful for the cat.

The use of towels can aid in gentle handling. Towels can be used to gently control a cat’s movement and for comfort. They should not be used to wrestle the cat or force the cat into positions.

For cats who are fearful, want to hide, cower, or try to get small and get away, covering the head gently with towel can make them feel settled and make handling them easier. When a fearful cat who wants to feel hidden is exposed, that cat can panic. Lightly covering their head with a towel can help these timid and fearful cats remain still.

Although it is common to dump cats out of carriers, try not to do this. Don’t tip the carrier upside down to dump the cat. Do not reach in and yank the cat, pull, or drag the cat out of the carrier. These approaches will simply frighten the cat, and a frightened cat is more likely to panic and react.

First, see if the cat will come out of the carrier on her own. Introduce yourself softly to the cat and offer treats. If the cat does not come out on her own, calmly remove the top half of the carrier. Frequently, we take cats out of the carrier earlier than necessary and many routine handling procedures can be done while the cat stays in the bottom half of the carrier.

Do as much as you can with the cat in the bottom half of the carrier. Use a towel to gently cover the cat if it makes her feel better. A towel can help keep the cat still, comfortable and prevent escape. To weigh the cat, weigh the cat in the carrier bottom and then weigh the bottom of an equivalent carrier or weigh the carrier bottom, once the cat is removed.

For box or top entry carriers, use a towel to cover the cat and then gently lift the cat out of the carrier.

If you would like to learn more about humane gentle feline handling, take my webinars, Feline Fundamentals Humane Handling Basics 1 and Feline Fundamentals Humane Handling Basics 2. To learn more about cat behavior, take my webinar, Feline Behavior, Body Language & Communication.

Thank you for taking this webinar. If you would like to get in touch, you can contact me through my website and by email.