

Feline Fundamentals - Humane Handling Basics 1 Webinar Script

Hi. I'm Alana Stevenson. I'm an animal behavior specialist and have been working with cats, professionally helping people resolve feline behavioral problems. This presentation goes over the importance of implementing gentle handling methods and techniques when working with cats to keep their stress levels low and to prevent ourselves and cats from getting injured. In part one, we will go over why our attitude matters and how our approach affects cats, the differences in body-language between content happy cats and stressed, fearful ones and environmental modifications and changes we can make when housing cats to keep them calmer, happier and more relaxed.

This presentation is suitable for anyone who likes cats, wants to learn more about them, or works with them professionally or in a volunteer capacity.

Why is gentle and humane feline handling important? If we like cats, we want to interact with them in a positive way. We also want these cats to be receptive to being handled by us in the future. Learning and implementing, gentle techniques reduces fear, pain, and anxiety, and prevents aggression. It prevents injury to the cat and protects us from being injured and getting bitten. It's an important animal welfare issue and it is vital for a cat's behavioral health. It also increases our emotional well-being and satisfaction when working with cats.

First, we need to have a positive attitude about cats. If you think of expressions used to refer to people who like cats, there is often a negative connotation – 'crazy cat lady' for instance. We often refer to cats negatively as well – cats are called untrainable, aloof, nasty or mean. Cats are frequently maligned and misunderstood.

This is why, to help cats, it's important to develop a positive attitude. This means we should minimally be calm around them and absolutely avoid expressions or labels such as 'mean,' 'nasty cat,' 'bad cat,' 'evil' or 'mad.'

Instead of negatively referring to the cat, describe the cat's behaviors in an objective way. In other words, what is the cat doing? Explain or state what the cat's behavior are. For instance, instead of saying the cat is mean or nasty, you might say the cat 'hisses when you reach for him,' or 'the cat growls and will not come out of the carrier.'

It's fine to use words such as scared, afraid, avoidant, frightened, or fearful.

Although the "get it done" mentality and handling cats roughly is often seen as quicker and more effective; it is neither efficient nor skillful. If you work in a shelter setting or in an environment where multiple people are handling cats – it's good to select the most skillful and gentlest handlers to oversee staff and volunteer training and teach others how to handle cats and work with them.

How we approach cats can greatly affect their behavior. Our approach is important because if an animal gets stressed and panics it is much harder to calm them down afterwards. Be quiet and

calm around cats. This means to speak softly and to move slowly and steadily. Avoid quick or rapid movements and broad hand gestures.

The video clip shows an excellent example of how to be calm and move slowly around cats, as well as how to speak softly to them.

When handling a cat, approach the cat from slightly behind him or from the side. Try not to face the cat directly, stare at or loom over him. In each of these photos, the handlers are next to or behind the cat.

Our body-language conveys our intentions. Instead of staring at the cat directly, look at the cat but then avert your gaze. Avoid direct eye-contact which can be scary, creepy, and startling to the cat.

Softly and slowly blinking at the cat can help soothe and ease the kitty. But do not slowly blink and then scruff, roughly handle, pin, stress out or cause pain to the cat.

When approaching and interacting with a cat in a cage, let the cat approach you. If the cat appears calm, offer your hand for the cat to sniff and/or give the cat a treat. Keep your body angled to the cat or try to stand sideways as you examine and handle the cat. Do not stand directly in front of the cat and lean or loom over her. In the video, Dr. Sheilah Roberston examines a cat in a cage using a low-stress gentle approach and minimal restraint.

Video

It's important to understand how to read a cat's body language and to know the difference between a happy or content cat and a fearful and stressed one.

Happy or content cats will have their ears up. You will be able to see the pinks of the ears or pinna. Their eyes will be soft and their tail will be up or relaxed and in line with their body. It will not be tucked or wrapped around them.

A fearful cat, however, will freeze and get small. They will lean back or cower and may try to get away or hide. Their ears will flatten and their pupils will dilate. Their tail will most likely be tucked. Their paws may sweat and they may shed excessively.

A fearful cat will avoid eye-contact or look away. They may even do this if they are hissing or in between hissing and lunging. As you see in these photos, both cats are avoiding eye-contact. Their ears are twisted or flattened, and their pupils are very large or dilated. These two cats, given a choice, want to avoid conflict.

Fearful cats will prefer to face away from you when being handled. These cats want to feel and be hidden which is very important to know when handling them.

In these photos, the cat is fearful. In the left photo, the cat is avoiding eye-contact and looking away. The middle picture shows the cat leaning back, cowering, trying to get small and ears are flattened. In both the left and middle photos, the pupils are dilated. When this cat is distracted by a toy, both his body and expression softens.

In this series of photos, the cat is visibly terrified (in this case of a dog). His ears are flat, pupils are widely dilated and whiskers are fanned. The cat cowers, tries to get small and leans back. He would hide if he had the option because he is cowering and against a wall. In the left and middle photo, the cat avoids eye-contact. In the middle photo, the cat hisses which is a fear-based response and defensive. The cat prefers to avoid conflict and get away. In the right photo, the cat looks directly at the dog, ears flattened, wide-eyed with pupils dilated, and leans back with whiskers fanned.

Other signs of stress in cats will be hissing, lip-licking, vocalizing such as growling, and piloerection (which means the hair sticking straight up). Hissing is often misunderstood. Hissing itself is not aggressive, it simply means the cat is fearful, defensive, or unhappy.

When cats are stressed you will see them nervously lick their lips. As they become more wound up they may growl or yowl – usually this is as they are held, handled or poked. If you see the cat get ‘puffy’ or their hair stands upright, this is a physiological startle response – it’s similar to our ‘hair standing up at the back of our neck.’

In this photo, this cat is threatened by and aggressive to strangers and guests to the home. His ears are flattened and his pupils are dilated, but he is not getting small or leaning backwards, and he makes direct eye-contact. He will hiss and lunge at them if they get close or within his personal space. He may also follow and lunge at strangers if they look directly or stare at him. Most cats, however, will fight only as a last resort.

You may want to download this handout which shows body-language signs and signals for feline anxiety. It is free and available from CattleDog Publishing by clicking on or copying and pasting the link. <http://info.drSophiaYin.com/free-poster-on-body-language-of-feline-anxiety>

There are a number of things that can make a cat fearful – cats don’t have many ways to communicate to diffuse stress and conflict as group animals do, so they easily can become frightened. When cats are fearful they will hide, freeze, or flee. Loud noises and voices, new strange environments, strange people and smells, rough handling, and being stared and poked, all can frighten a cat. If you work in a shelter setting or a clinic, the reflection and noise of cold metal cages and barking dogs can also be startling.

How cats are housed can make them more comfortable or frightened. Anything we can do to make the situation easier for the cat will be helpful for us as well. Preventing stress is especially important. Cats who are less stressed are easier to interact with and handle.

Cats have an acute sense of hearing. They hear at frequencies above our hearing range. Loud and sudden noises are especially startling and jarring for a cat. Be cognizant of this when opening and closing doors to cat rooms and cages. Instead of swinging doors open or letting them slam behind you. Try to open and close doors and cages gently and quietly.

When cats are in carriers, whenever possible, place them on higher surfaces or countertops instead of keeping them on the floor. Whether in carriers or cages, do not keep cats near foot

traffic or adjacent to slamming doors. Being low to the ground can make a cat feel very vulnerable and loud noises can be startling and jarring.

Fearful and timid cats should always be put in higher cages. Higher cages make the cat feel more comfortable and in control. Avoid using the lower cages, especially for fearful cats. If lower cages have to be used, it is better to put the friendly, out-going and social cats in them.

Not only do higher cages make a cat feel more confident and settled, higher cages can also help to prevent escape and making handling as well as moving a cat to and from a carrier or to another cage easier.

Although it may not be the case at your facility, ideally, bottom cages should be at least 24" or 2 ft above floor level.

Cats prefer to hide when they are frightened. Hiding is coping mechanism. These cats in the photos are fearful. They are flush against the wall and their pupils are dilated. They are trying to get small and hide. The cats in these photos would benefit behaviorally by having a place to hide within the cage.

It's important to provide boxes or cat dens within cages for the cat to hide in. Providing a 'safe' place to hide for a cat can be simple. A paper shopping bag can be placed on its side and a soft towel or fuzzy blanket can be placed inside the bag for comfort. This provides a little den or hiding place for the cat.

A cut out upside down box or an open box placed on its side in a cage can provide a hiding place for a cat and can separate the cat from lying 'next to' or in the litter pan.

If hideaways, or boxes and paper bags aren't available, simply place a towel over part of the cage or carrier. This can help a cat who is frightened and give them the option to hide.

Little changes or improvements can make a difference. Cats like soft things, so always provide a soft blanket or towel for the cat to lie down on. A cat will not be comfortable on hard cold metal, laminate, tile, or concrete flooring.

Although cages can often be small, try to separate the cat's bedding, food, water and litter. Whenever possible, try to keep the bed, and food and water away from the litter pan. Adding a carrier, box, or paper bag or rolling a towel or blanket into a bumper/donut type bed can help achieve this. If possible, put water next to where the cat sleeps or rests instead of the litter pan.

Look at this photo for a minute or so. What do you see that can be changed? This is a large scale animal shelter. How can things be improved for this cat?

You should have at least noticed 3 things: 1) There should be something soft for the cat besides newspaper. 2) This cat is fearful and in a crouched position. A simple cut out upside down box, box tipped on its side, carrier or hide-away would make this cat feel safer and separate the cat from the litter box. 3) The food and water should be positioned on the other wall, away from the

litter box (if possible). Minimally, the pet food and water bowl could be positioned so that both the food and the water are next to the front of the cage, so the food is further away from the litter pan.

In this photo of kittens in a cage. How can this situation be improved?

1) These kittens are lying in their litter box. 2) By adding a box on its side, basket, or even rolled towel to create a soft bumper bed, these kittens would sleep on the towels or softer surface. 3) This bowl is too large for these kittens and it has hard for them to access. These kittens are also too young for dry food which was in the bowl at the time. Another thing you may have noticed, is these kittens do not have a heat source and would benefit from a heat source for warmth. In fact, these kittens were shaking when huddled together because of the cool temperature.

What we play also effects animals. A study on how music affected cats under general anesthesia was published in the Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery. The study, as others have found, showed that music does affect the autonomic nervous system. Classical music decreased pupil diameter and respiratory rate, while both pop and heavy metal increased pupil diameter and respiratory rate under anesthesia. The cats' pupil diameter and respiratory rates were highest with heavy metal.

This is important for those who work with cats either on intake at shelters, at clinics, or when housing them. Although we may like rock and roll to keep us going, this music for cats will add to their stress. Keeping a station on light classical, strings, or a zen-type instrumental will help keep a soothing atmosphere which will be calming for both people and cats.

Thank you to the following for photos and resources for this webinar. Links are provided if you would like to learn more about gentle, humane, low-stress feline handling techniques.

Thank you for participating in this webinar Feline Fundamentals, Humane Handling Basics 1. If you would like to reach out, I can be contacted through my website and by email.