

WORKING TOWARD A FEAR FREE SHELTER

On The Agenda:

- Intro to Fear Free Sheltering
- Emotional health
- Understanding how cats communicate
- How cats learn and how to help them be happy learners

What is “Fear Free”

Created by Dr. Marty Becker in 2016, it's a program that offers on line and in person training for veterinary professionals, shelter staff, trainers, groomers and pet parents.... All aimed at increasing the pet/ human bond through gentle handling, responding to needs, reducing stress and allowing for normal responses to interactions.

Fear Free at HSHV

- All incoming shelter staff will complete Fear Free training as part of their on-boarding training
- Most current shelter staff have become certified
- Veterinary program is separate and different from Shelter program
- Professional certification (trainers and groomers) is also separate.
- Fear Free, Happy Homes is free to the public.
- <https://fearfreehappyhomes.com/>



Emotional Health

- Healthy = being sound in mind, body and spirit
- Animals depend on us for shelter, nutrition, grooming, medical care
- We must support and meet emotional needs, as well
- Good emotional health means animals can effectively function, learn and adapt in every day life.
- Can cope with a stressful situation, do not experience lasting fear, anxiety or stress.

Emotional health creates content and resilient pets



Meeting emotional needs in the shelter

- Opportunities for social interaction with people and other animals
- Allowing for different functional areas for sleeping and eliminating
- Allowing for a safe space to rest and/ or hide without being disturbed
- Ability to change locations within the environment
- Ability to engage in species specific behaviors (scratching, play, exercise, mental stimulation)



The Stress Response

- By watching behavior, we can gauge emotional well being
- Emotional needs vary by individual.... genetics, socialization, history, environment... all play part in stress response and emotional needs
- How an animal behaves is a reflection of how they're feeling. It's a reflection of their underlying emotional state.



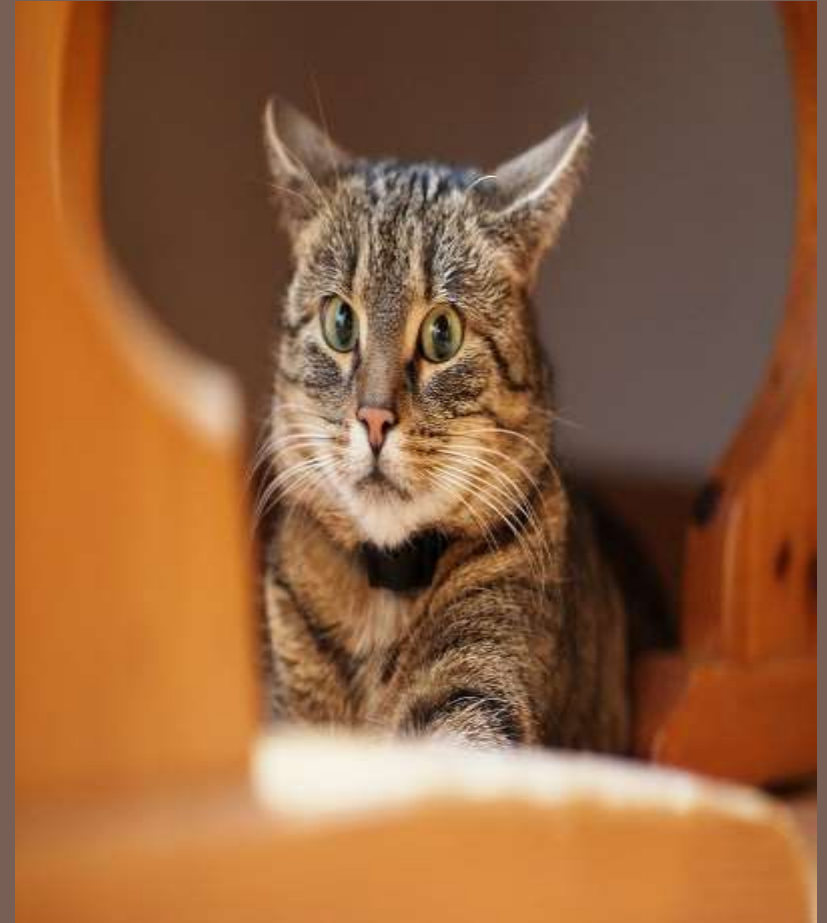
What IS Stress?

The sum of the body and mind's response to anything that disrupts our normal baseline of functioning.

Not necessarily bad if you can easily return to that baseline state.

We're referring to the negative, potentially harmful stress responses and will characterize it as mild, moderate or severe.

Distress results when stress is severe or prolonged, or when the individual can't cope with or escape from the stress.



Stress Response continued

- Varied among individuals
- Dependent on perception of the event
- Often accompanied by feelings of fear, anxiety and/ or frustration
- Profound influence on health and behavior
- Transport, confinement, isolation, smells, noises, other animals, diet changes, handling, irregular caregiver schedules, lack of predictability, absence of familiar human contact, presence of unfamiliar human contact... lack of opportunity and control... everything is a stressor!



Sight and the stress response

Cats are highly sensitive to movement and can see and function at low levels of light. They have a wide visual field, as well.

They lack depth perception, though. Color vision is also limited.

Cats have “personal space” which can also be referred to as “flight distance”.

This means:

Fast movement can be perceived as a threat. Postures can also seem threatening. Cats are also a predatory species and moving away quickly can trigger fight or flight.

Slow movements allow for a cat to observe, assess and respond more appropriately.

Approaching to the side, slowly, achieves the same goal. Use nonthreatening gestures.

Give them space, approach slowly, do not move into their flight space until you know them well or they solicit attention in your space.

Hearing and the stress response

Animals can learn to predict the meaning of sounds (food cart!).

Vocalizations from other cats can be upsetting.

Loud voices and equipment triggers stress.

We can:
Speak quietly

Sing, read or talk to cats in a soothing voice

Ask others to be mindful of the noise they may be creating



Smell and the stress response

**Very keen sense of smell...
dogs and cats smell in
color!**

**Amazing ability to detect
and differentiate scent.**

**Smells can trigger happy
events (treats) and
negative events
(isopropyl alcohol).**

We can:

Avoid using strong odors, perfumes,
hand sanitizers.

If possible, wash hands instead of
using hand sanitizer

Be mindful of visiting with cats who
may be reactive. Those may want to
be a first visit, if possible.

Taste and the stress response

Like humans, cats have taste buds and respond to a variety of tastes.

Also like humans, cats are sensitive to bitter tastes and will avoid them.

What does this mean????

Treats!!!

Use them to entice shy cats for being brave, reward rambunctious cats for good behavior, or just to say thank you for a visit, as you leave the cage.

Avoid treats that have little smell, we want stinky, tasty treats to work with our cats.

Touch and the stress response

Specialized whiskers and guard hairs make cats sensitive to touch.

Touch can be pleasurable, but it can also be uncomfortable or even distressing. Area around mouth, neck, paws, belly... all can be uncomfortable spots.

This means:

The way we go about touching a cat will greatly influence their response to that touch.

Cats respond best to slow, steady pressure. A good massage in a safe area can really feel nice.

Moving too quickly or using repetitive, full body pets cat result in an aggressive response.

HOW CATS COMMUNICATE IN THE SHELTER

Active and Passive Communication

Active communication can present as tense body posture, vocalizing, “acting out” in rough play or nipping during a visit

Passive communication is a lack of behavior. Feigning sleep, refusal to eat, constant hiding, lack of grooming, hypervigilance, depression/withdrawal



Terms to think about

Anxiety- emotional reaction of apprehension or uneasiness to an anticipated danger or threat

Fear- emotional reaction of apprehension and fright due to the actual presence or proximity of the trigger

Frustration- a situation where an animal is motivated to perform a behavior but is not able to do so

Emotional conflict- when an animal has competing emotions or motivations.

Examples:

Kitty in condo 2 hears the floor cleaner turn on down by adoptable dogs, triggering anxiety. After some time passes, the floor cleaner approaches her condo and her fear response is ignited.

Logan in condo 1 really wants to play with the little girl who's waving at him from outside his condo, but he can't because the door is in the way, causing frustration. Once she's in the condo with him, she pets him over and over again on his back and he wants to enjoy the visit, but he can't because she's being too rough with him and he becomes conflicted and swats at her.

The Four F's

- Fight behaviors
 - Flight behaviors
 - Fret or Fidget behaviors
 - Freeze behaviors
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- Can present as active or passive
 - Can occur almost as reflexes when an animal is fearful, anxious and/or stressed

We're likely familiar with freeze, fight and flight...

Fret and fidget are less known:

- Pacing
- Shifting back and forth in place
- Quick movements around cage
- Lip licking, yawning, blinking
smelling something without reason, grooming suddenly...
often what we call displacement behaviors, a stress induced behavior that seems out of context.

Indicates high levels of frustration, anxiety and stress

8 Key points of observation

When observing body language, keep an eye on:

- Overall body posture
- Hair coat
- Eyes
- Ears
- Mouth
- Tail
- Vocalizing
- Context



Ask yourself:

Is the cat leaning in towards you, or moving away?

Are they tense or loose and wiggly?

Is their hair coat standing on end or lying normally against their body?

Are they looking at you, or away from you?

Are you seeing a hard stare, or soft eyes?

Are their ears upright, or flattened? Pinned back? Neutral?

Is the mouth open or closed? Tense or loose? Are they licking their lips?

Is the tail held high, or is it neutral? Tight against the body? Is it swishing quickly? End of tail twitching?

Do you hear purring? Are they yawning or hissing?

What's happening in the room? Is it busy, or quiet? Has the cat had multiple visits that day? What did other comforters note prior to your visit? What senses are being engaged?

The Relaxed Cat

- Body appears loose
 - Hair coat is flat to body
 - Soft, squinty eyes and alert, but no tension
 - Ears are relaxed and at the side of the head
 - Mouth closed, appears relaxed
 - Tail is loose and behind body
 - Not prepared for flight
- This cat will likely solicit attention and/ or play. Groom and rest normally, remain relaxed and calm, observe and respond to their environment with ease.



Fight, Flight and Freeze

- Body tense and crouched
- Slight piloerection on back of tiger brown cat
- Pupils wide, hard eyes
- Ears down and to the side and erect, at front of head
- Mouth closed but tense, and open and likely hissing
- Tail tense and clenched to body
- Tiger brown likely prepared for flight
- Don't know context, both cats appear to be preparing for fight or flight. Orange cat is likely in freeze mode.



Fret and Fidget

Harder to define, behaviors really need to be taken in context:

- Can be actively seeking attention or appear to be very fearful
- In an active cat: pacing, pawing, repetitive grooming, vocalizing, lip licking, eyes moving rapidly, moving away suddenly... some behaviors to look for.
- In a shy cat: eyes moving rapidly, lip licking, vocalizing, moving quickly away... just a few behaviors to look for.



Learning theory... super Cliff's Notes version

Habituation:

An animal learns that a situation, object or event is neither important or meaningful. If the situation, object or event doesn't harm them and has no consequences, good or bad, the animal will stop reacting over time. E.g.: cat wearing collar



Systematic desensitization:

Need to know what the animal's trigger is. Controlled exposure to trigger, keeping animal below threshold, until they become desensitized to trigger. Most often paired with rewards. E.g.: trimming nails



More Cliff's Notes...

Sensitization: Animal has a negative response to a trigger, which becomes stronger every time they encounter the trigger. Behavior becomes stronger, as well. E.g.: forcing a fearful kitten to be held, eventually the kitten becomes defensive. (flooding)



Using what we know to help

Classical conditioning... learning by association. Reinforcers used to increase behaviors we want... very simplified version of CC.

- Use/ employ something that causes a positive response
- Can help overcome negative associations
- Example: leaving a food motivator in a cage with a fearful cat, regardless of response. The cat is learning that someone coming in the cage always results in something positive.



One more method

Operant conditioning... creating an association between behavior and consequence. We'll look mostly at positive reinforcement and positive punishment.

Positive reinforcement: reward for desired behavior. E.g.: fearful cat moves toward you a bit, you give the cat a food motivator.

Negative punishment: undesired behavior results in removal of something the animal wants. E.g.: frustrated cat nips at your hand for more attention/ play. You move away from the cat and end the visit.



Things to think about

We need to be aware of triggers and stress thresholds... that's where understanding of body language comes in.

Avoid triggers and thresholds... redirect, reward, end on positive note.

Tools are not effective if we're increasing fear, anxiety, stress and frustration.

