

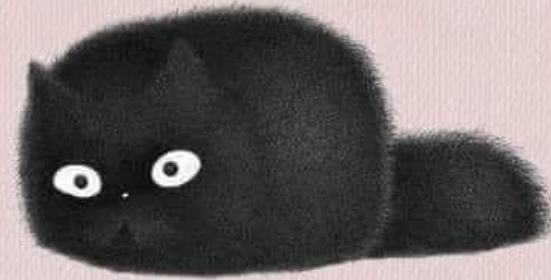
Understanding Body Language and Behavior

FELINE BODY LANGUAGE, TREATMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Agenda

- Cage signs and what they mean
- Who are our cats?
 - Your cat at home vs shelter cats
- Body Language
 - Fear responses
 - Handling sensitivities and overstimulation
- How to respond

when touch is wrong
the bite is strong
when touch is right
I still might bite



PURR.IN.INK

Cats can be subtle!

- Almost imperceptible shifts in body language can be confusing and surprising.
- Trigger stacking... what happened for them before you interacted with them?
- Our goal should always be to make their day easier and less stressful



What does “no kill” mean for our cats?

- Fearful, defensive and poorly socialized cats remain in our care until they find foster or adoption.
- Daily management and monitoring
 - Treatment as they allow
- Unpredictable and inconsistent care and interactions make their stay more stressful and difficult



Mindful language

- Report observable language
 - Honestly and with detail
- Avoid labels
- Strike “attack” and “out of nowhere” from our collective vocabulary
- Understand that behavior comes from a response to a trigger... sometimes we are the trigger
 - It's almost **always** our fault and that's ok!!
- No bad cats!



Shelter cat vs your cat at home

- Shelter cats have lost:
 - Routine
 - Natural environment
 - Control
 - Consistent caregivers
 - Consistent and predictable interactions
 - Touch, play
 - Quiet
 - Comfort
 - Outdoor cats in foreign land



What does body language tell us?

Understanding a cat's threshold for handling and interaction, and their signals to indicate when they're reaching that threshold helps you to know when to give them space and gives them the confidence to know that they're safe with you. They tell us how they're feeling with their eyes, ears, tail, body position and interest in interaction. We just have to listen to them!

Before entering a cage or condo

What do I need to know?

Behavior related signs and stickers

- Check all signs before visiting
- I'm New, Go Slow
- Go Slow, I'm Shy
- I Might Door Dash
- Just Chillin'
 - Staff only
 - Volunteers Ok
- Keep Calm
- Desk or star sticker



Observation Logs

- Check notes before visit
 - Blue Dot/ treatment notes
 - How many visits that day?
 - How did those visits go?
- Individual cat page
 - Date and initials
 - Notes for each cat
- Communal log
- Petpoint- memos and care activities



BODY LANGUAGE BASICS

Loose, attention seeking cats

These are the easy cats!

Soft face and eyes

- Eyes closed or half closed
- No tension in face



Loose body posture

- Paws and legs exposed
- Belly exposed
- Tail out and loose
- Neutral pupils



Tail loose

- Tail up and loose
- S curve
- Body loose
- Pupils neutral



Things to remember when working with a seemingly loose, attention seeking cat

- Proper introductions
- Pet on face and cheeks
- Allow them to seek attention
 - Self pet
- Avoid full body pets
- Offer play
- Watch for other signs
 - Tail, pupils, coat
 - Handling sensitivities
 - High arousal

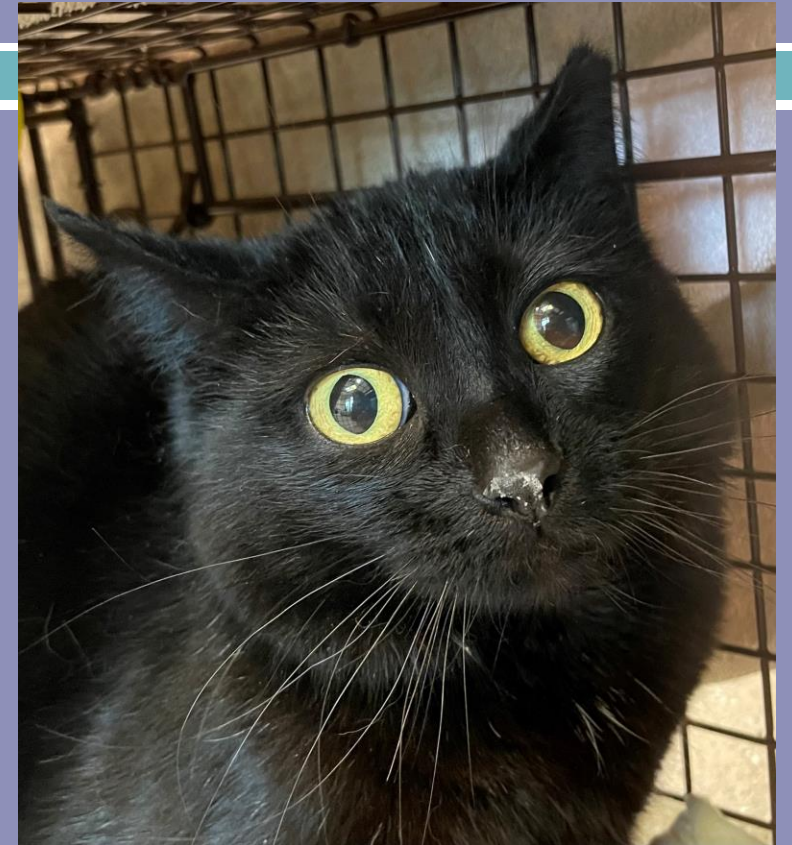


Fear response

What does a fear response look like?

Dilated pupils

- Pupil wide open
- Context: low light?



Tail tight around body

Protecting vulnerable body parts



Ears

- Flat to head
- Low and sideways
- High and forward facing
- Watch those whiskers



Clenched body posture

- Frozen
- Body tension
- May feign sleep
- Turn away
- Crouched
- “army crawl”
- Paws out
 - Fight or flight
- Often see lip licking



Clenched, alert body position

- Upright body position
- Pupils wide
- Ears alert
- Bracing for fight or flight
- Stare/ frontal
- Can often see paw raise



Kittens... they can be much more difficult

- Fear response often very quickly escalates to fight or flight
- Differentiate between poorly socialized and feral, there is a difference!
- Working with them is the same as working with adults, but we need to be more aware of our presence in the cage and their response to it.



How to respond- no physical interaction

- Talk only
 - Offer treats or wet food
 - Offer toys
 - Quiet time in their space
 - Clicker work
 - No physical touch
-
- No “forced loving” AKA flooding
 - Don’t reinforce their fear



When to move forward

- Softening body
 - Release of tension in face
 - Any forward movement
 - Interest in toys
 - Watch for shift to fear response
 - Give them choice
-
- If you've spent a good deal of time with the cat and know their threshold well, you can push them just slightly



Overstimulation, high arousal and handling sensitivities

Can be very easy to miss and very easy to misunderstand

Constricted pupils

- Watch for shift from neutral pupil to constricted pupil
- Coat, tail and pupils are going to tell a more complete story



Tail and coat

- Tail energy
 - Twitching
 - Swishing
- Coat
 - Piloerection
 - Can include base of tail
 - Rippling



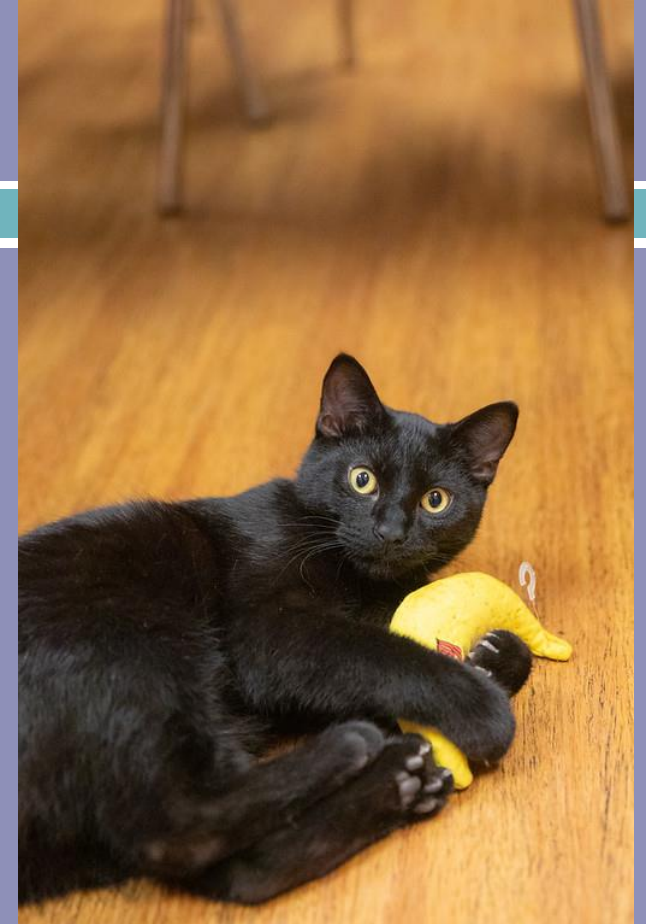
Whole body

- Constricted pupils
- Body tension
- Ears high and forward
- Frontal gaze
- Prepared for energy
 - Shifting body weight



Whole body

- Pupils
- Intensity of gaze
- Crouched body
 - Ready for “attack”
- Play stance



Body posture and energy in movement

- Often attention seeking
 - Can appear loose
 - Transition quickly
- Watch for change in energy
 - Attention seeking to avoidant
 - Arousal level increasing
- Watch energy in the room
 - Lots of people
 - Vocal cats
 - Active cats



High arousal

- Attention seeking
- Hyper aware of environment
- Energy in movement
- Head whipping
- Active



What causes this?

- Discomfort with environment
- Personality/ temperament
- Historical interaction with people
- Lack of trust
 - Threshold not respected
- Trigger stacking
- More often than not, this is cage related and not a true behavior.
 - Intensity should decrease in a home.



What can we do for these cats?

- **GIVE THEM SPACE!!**
- **Lots of playtime**
- **Treat only**
- **Talk only**
- **Clicker work**
- **Face/ cheeks only**
- **Respond to their energy and body language**
- **Enrichment**
- **Pressure free visits**





When the pieces don't add up

When they're conflicted, we're conflicted

Conflicted behavior... our cats are so often conflicted!

- Body language can offer some cues
- Can seem attention seeking
- Show avoidance
- Must pay attention to what they're offering and respond appropriately



What do you see?



Is this cat ready for a visit?



What about this guy?



Things to remember

- Shelter cats have different needs than our cats at home
- Look at the entire body
- Always let them approach
- Limit full body pets
- Let them seek attention on their terms
- No “forced loving”
 - Reinforces their fear and damages the bond
- Know their threshold



THANK YOU!!

QUESTIONS?