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Low Stress Handling of Difficult Cats

Learning objectives:

1. Analyze the effect of your hospital's environment on your patients' emotional state
2. Implement environmental changes that can decrease patient stress levels
3. Recognize how your body language and handling techniques affect your patients.
4. Learn the principles of managing difficult cats with specific techniques to use in practice.

Introduction

Are you still routinely scruffing cats or stretching them out for jugular venipuncture? It doesn't have to be that way anymore! Learn how everything you do, from the way you set up the waiting room and treatment area, to how you greet the cat, to the restraint technique you choose, influences whether the cat is fractious or calm. Dr. Yin will lead you through seven general principles for managing difficult cats, as well as a number of specific techniques that you can apply immediately in practice.

In the average hospital, dog and cat bites as well as cat scratches are the most common cause of injury (Jeyaretnam et al. 2000). A survey of veterinarians from Minnesota and Wisconsin revealed that 92.3% had been bitten by dogs and 81% had been bitten by cats (August 1988). In addition to creating a situation where animal caregivers or the pet could get injured, handling animals poorly or roughly can have even more serious implications. Restraining pets in a forceful or crude manner can make pets behaviorally worse to the point where they can no longer receive thorough veterinary care. For animals already suffering from fear-related issues the handling can precipitate or heighten aggression and fear making them difficult or impossible to treat. Aggression can also generalize to other contexts and situations, and can ultimately lead to behavior-related euthanasia or shelter relinquishment. For those reason as well as others, it is important to learn to handle our patients more skillfully. To do so, one must first learn to read the subtleties of body language, be aware of how your own body language affects our patients, and then understand several key principles of learning theory.

Before coming in for that appointment

For cats to have low stress visits to the veterinary hospital, prep work needs to start at home with the owner. Cats need to learn to associate good things happening with their carriers. To start, the owner can serve the cat's meals in the carrier. If the cat has already learned to associate the carrier with bad things happening, the door or the top can be left off the carrier until the cat is comfortable going in to eat. Then the top can be put on and when comfortable with that, the gate can be added. When the cat is comfortable going into a fully assembled carrier to eat, the owner can shut the door and give treats, without locking, for very short periods of time, gradually increasing the amount of time the door is closed. Once the cat has a positive association being confined in the carrier, the owner can take the cat in the carrier

to the car and then give treats while in the car. The owner will need to enlist some help from a friend so that the cat can continually be offered treats during the next step which is to start taking very short trips (like around the block) that end at home. The length of the trips can be increased if the cat is remaining comfortable on short trips. For more detailed instructions on how to go about crate training cats and training cats for car rides, see Dr. Yin's text for veterinary professionals called *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats* chapters 6.3-6.5. (Available at www.lowstresshandling.com the online abridged version is available for free at www.lowstresshandling.com/online/abridged.)

Learn to read cat body language

Cats can be a little more challenging to read than dogs because their fear response is often subtle. They may freeze silently or just walk away. Fearful cats are tense. They make themselves small, lean back and lower their heads and remain still. Sometimes they may look sleepy. The degree to which they do these things depends on how scared they are. Cats may also become hypervigilant when scared. Instead of moving their heads to check what is around them like dogs do, they tend to use their ears to assess their surroundings. Their ears change direction frequently when they are hypervigilant. When agitated and losing patience, cats' tails start to twitch. Highly agitated cats are easy to spot. The pupils dilate, the ears are pinned down and facing backwards and they crouch like they are ready to run.

What we do to make the problem worse

When working with cats, it's important to avoid looming over, staring at and reaching for the cat. Squatting close to the cat while directly facing it can cause a fearful reaction as can making the cat feel trapped or cornered. It is a good idea to avoid petting cats when their body language indicates they don't find it comforting, to do otherwise is to risk making the problem worse.

Cats who enjoy being petted will approach their human family members in a relaxed manner. When petted, these cats stay relaxed. They may even lean into the person to solicit petting or raise their heads to meet the person's hand.

Make them comfortable

Start by providing a comfortable environment in your hospital. Have a separate waiting area for cats, away from the dogs. Have towels available to cover the carriers of cats who are uncomfortable around other cats as well as dogs and move them into the exam room as quickly as possible. Suggest owners use Feliway spray (feline calming pheromone) in the carrier. Hospitals can use Feliway diffusers in their cat exam rooms, treatment areas and cat ward.



Fig.17.1-B

Fig.17.1-B: For animals who have not been socialized to all types of people and pets, seeing unfamiliar people and animals in a treatment room is like seeing monsters or aliens in a hospital emergency room.

Consider using the exam room as the treatment area for difficult and poorly socialized cats if other animals are in the treatment area.

Remove from carrier

To get a cat who cowers at the back of its carrier out to exam, don't reach in to grab or try to shake the cat out of the carrier. Instead, unscrew the screws that hold the top and bottom portions together and elevate the rear portion of the carrier top so that a towel can be slipped in between to cover the cat. Once the cat is covered with the towel, the top of the carrier can be removed. Be sure the cat's head is completely covered and tuck the towel in around the sides of the cat. With the towel in place, lift the cat from the carrier and onto an exam table that has a warm fleece, yoga mat or towel as a barrier between the cold metal table and the cat.

Use towels for fearful and difficult cats

Towels can be very effective tools for keeping cats calm. However, the use of towels to allow you to hang on to cats while they continue to struggle and scream and even urinate and defecate is not what is being advocated here. Animals subjected to this type of treatment with or without a towel will be worse with each visit and may not be treatable in the near future. Often, owned cats with repeated bad visits are more difficult to handle than feral cats. It is important to remember that the use of toweling is to keep the cat calm and prevent him from trying to struggle or escape. If toweling doesn't work, then use chemical restraint.

When you use a towel to remove the cat from his carrier, leave the towel over the cat now that he's on the table. Step by step instructions are covered in the lecture for different toweling techniques depending on the procedure you need to perform. These techniques are described and each step pictured in Dr. Yin's text book, *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats* chapters 6.3-6.5. (Available at www.lowstresshandling.com the online abridged version is available for free at www.lowstresshandling.com/online/abridged.)

For More Information

- Dr. Sophia Yin's behavior web site at www.DrSophiaYin.com
- For articles and videos about training cats and dealing with behavior problems in cats go to http://drsophiayin.com/resources/cat_behavior
- *Low Stress Handling, Restraint and Behavior Modification of Dogs and Cats* by Sophia Yin, chapters 1 and 2, 5, 14 (Available at www.lowstresshandling.com the online abridged version is available for free at www.lowstresshandling.com/online/abridged)
- Read the AVSAB position statement and guidelines "The Use of Punishment in Dealing with Behavior Problems in Animals."
http://www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/images/stories/Position_Statements/Combined_Punishment_Statements.pdf
- Read the AVASAB position statement on "The Use of Dominance Theory in Behavior Modification of Animals":
http://www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/images/stories/Position_Statements/dominance_%20statement.pdf
- Visit www.AVSABonline.org to find out about veterinarians and behavior.
- Read *How to Behave So Your Dog Behaves* by Sophia Yin
<http://drsophiayin.com/products/>

