

No More Cat Wrangling, Techniques for Force-Free Feline Handling

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Many cats feel fear, anxiety, and stress at their veterinary visits. Compassionate handling techniques help to prevent and limit that fear, anxiety and stress. With cats less fearful and stressed; they are easier to handle, we can obtain more accurate diagnostics, they recover more quickly, and clients, animals and veterinary staff are happier. Supportive handling techniques are intended to minimize fear and pain experienced by cats during the veterinary examination and increase the safety of the veterinary team

Also, cats are the most popular pet in the United States, yet every year, we are seeing less and less cats in practice. A huge part of this is due to the stress cats have at the clinic reported by clients as well as the stress associated with travel. We, as veterinary professionals, have an opportunity to help more cats and clients when addressing both the emotional and physical wellbeing of the cats we work with.

Tools to reduce Fear, anxiety, and stress

Communication

Maintaining good communication between the veterinary health care team and owners.

We can gain trust in our clients by

- Creating a nurturing environment for the client and address how they can help you create a low stress visit for them and their pet including communicating travel to the hospital
- looking for and sharing signs of fear, anxiety, and stress (FAS)

Reducing stress at the vet starts at home with the client

- Choosing the right carrier
- Carrier training
- Low Stress Travel
- PVP's and calming aids

- describing how FAS will be addressed during the visit

- describing what you are doing and how it benefits their pet
- addressing the client's concerns about their pet's behavior

The best way to know a patient's emotional state and whether they are relaxed enough to cope with the stress of veterinary procedures is to watch their body language. Our behavior and body language affect the patient's emotional state. When the veterinary team is relaxed and calm, the patient is more likely to be relaxed and calm too.

Understanding body language in feline patients is essential for evaluating stress levels and working with patients effectively.

Feline body Language

- Relaxed o Face soft o Ears forward o Pupils almond shaped o Tail away from body o Relaxed musculature
- Stressed o Hissing o Lips drawn back o Ears out to the side o Pupils dilated (round) o Tail tucked around body o Body crouched o Back arched

Cats are always communicating how they are feeling with humans and other animals with their body language. Cat Communication signs can be subtle and due to this, they are often missed, or we miss misinterpret what the cat is trying to say. As a result, when a cat's polite warning they are not feeling safe goes unnoticed, their gentle requests may escalate into louder shouts for others to listen which can result in a bite.

When working with cats, it is crucial for us to understand how cats communicate and repeatedly assess body language. A better understanding of cat body language allows us as veterinary technicians to better understand our patients, which in turn allows for a more comfortable and calmer patient. When patients are less fearful and stressed, they are easier to handle, we can obtain more accurate readings of vital signs, they recover more quickly, and they are generally happier to be in our care.

Words Matter

It is important what words we are using when describing behavior. We should avoid using labels such as fractious, stubborn, or unpredictable and instead describe the behavior we are seeing. When describing behavior, we should be objective meaning not influenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or prejudice and based on facts versus subjective meaning influenced by personal feelings, tastes, or opinions. Labels do not describe behavior or its cause, put the cause of behavior inside the animal (absolves people of responsibility) and create stories around why behaviors occur.

A common example I see is the word fractious to describe the cat in the photo below, we have all been to a cage with a cage card with this word on it. Fractious is objective, instead, the cage card should read fearful, which is based on the body language we are seeing. With a cage card stating fearful, the staff are more likely to use considerate approach and be better prepared which helps to set everyone, including the cat, for success.



Considerate Approach (CA)

Considerate Approach (CA) is recognizing all the sensory and environmental inputs that a patient might experience and using this information to approach the patient in the calmest, least confrontational way possible. Considering a patient's perspective when working with them can help to reduce FAS.

- Avoiding looming, leaning, staring, and approaching patients from the front
- Turn your body sideways as you enter/approach
- Do not extend your hands towards the pet: let the pet approach you
- Move calmly and no abrupt gestures
- Offer treats
- Avoid Jolly happy talk/higher pitch tone
- Keep cat carrier covered with pheromone-infused towel and elevated on a high surface
- Avoid pulling or shaking the cat out of the carrier
- Take the carrier apart

Before you begin handling

- Review chart
- Create a comfortable environment (nonslip surfaces, classical music, hiding places, etc)
 - Assess the environment, equipment, patient (and client) visually, yourself/ your team
 - Minimize entry and exiting: have items needed prior to working with the cat
 - o What are the patient's medical needs vs wants.
- Make a handling plan- address who will be doing what order of procedures, where and when, are we following same plan as last time or do we need to alter/update it, where will be giving injection/drawing blood, etc
- Do what can be done to minimize FAS
- A critical thinking approach needs to be done as we do when we approach any medical issue.

Use distractions and rewards

- o examples of various rewards and distractions (food, toys, brushes, etc)
- o Food delivery options
 - o Assess what animal likes, is there a reduction of fear and stress, make a note what patient likes
 - Use before, during, and after
 - o how to deliver food and other rewards

- Assess animal
- Assess if distraction decreases FAS, animal enjoys it
- Use food to lure into desired position/treat trail
- Give treat on substrate animal prefers
- Present food from the side instead of directly in front of face
- Use food to lure head away from handler
- Consider procedure
- Treat placement
- Communication

Changing “restraint” to supportive handling

- Assess the animal's body language and be flexible with handling techniques based on their individual preference. Allow the animal to maintain its chosen position and vary your touch with the animal's response
- Avoid unnatural, uncomfortable, or painful positions when possible
- Avoid lateral recumbency when possible
- Avoid stretching

- Supporting the patient
- Minimizing pressure
- Positioning with comfort
- Allowing them to remain in their chosen position when possible
- Use techniques that support the animal's body rather than restraining them

Positioning

- Do not reposition the animal by pulling on legs, ears, tail, skin, or fur
 - Can the animal perform a learned behavior?
 - If no response, move to luring- use food/toy to lure patient into desired position/treat trail
- Physically Manipulate- last choice
 - Provide additional tools such as food, pheromones, medications, or handling tools

Touch gradient

Touch gradient has two components: initiating hands on physical contact with a patient and administering treatments that involve contact with the body such as injections, nail trimming, etcetera. Start with a touch gradient prior to the exam by placing your hand gently on the patient in a nonpainful area, while talking in a low, calm tone of voice. Try to move your hand while still in contact with the patient instead of lifting and replacing it in a different area. Assess and re-assess the patient's level of FAS and response to touch throughout procedures. If a certain location, sensation, or type of touch causes increased FAS, pause and assess the patient and the situation.

Avoid prolonged struggling

- Safety tools (often and early)
- handling plan
 - If animal struggle >2 seconds, stop, reposition
 - If after 2-3 restarts, there is not a decrease in FAS and arousal is escalating (panic or aggression) STOP
 - (reassess and modify approach) Based on the patient's stress level, medical condition, and nature of procedure/exam, consider:
 - Reassess and modify approach/restraint
 - Give break
 - Get assistance from more experienced person

-sedation best before the animal is severely over threshold -If not emergent, put off procedure- counterconditioning plan

What about Scruffing?

Many veterinary technicians, including myself, were taught to grab a cat by the scruff when they need to be restrained. Although long believed to be a harmless way to provide restraint and mimic how a mother cat picks up her kittens, scruffing is not a secure way to restrain a cat, is forceful, and induces fear and anxiety in most cats.

What is the problem with scruffing?

- Cats are only grabbed by the scruff on their neck in limited circumstances: during the first few weeks of life by their mother, during mating, fighting, and when they are being attacked by a predator. None of these situations, which create stress, are helpful to mimic in a home, veterinary or shelter setting.
- Lifting a cat or suspending its body weight by its scruff is unnecessary and could be (is?) painful.
- Cats prefer avoidance to conflict and do not want to fight. They will try to get away from a bad situation, instead of confronting it. Scruffing entirely removes the cat's option to retreat and its sense of control, causing potentially aggressive behavior.
- According to the AAFP(American Association of Feline Practitioners), International Cat Care, many catonly veterinarians and veterinary behaviorists do not recommend scruffing and instead recommend Cat Friendly, Low Stress, and Fear Free handling techniques. Resources:

For more information on force free friendly handling resources: visit
www.chirrupsandchatter.com @chirrupsandchatter on Facebook, tiktok, & Instagram

www.fearfreepets.com <https://icatcare.org>

2022 AAFP/ISFM Cat Friendly Handling Guidelines

References available upon request.