



HANDLING CATS IN THE SHELTER ENVIRONMENT

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To handle a cat safely, handle him humanely. Try to look at the situation from the cat's perspective. *The safer an animal feels, the more safely he can be handled and housed.*

THINKING LIKE A CAT IN A SHELTER – IDENTIFYING STRESSORS

The stress experienced by sheltered animals is unique, and many of the primary stressors are out of our control. The shelter environment LACKS the familiarity (and, therefore, safety) of “home” and ADDS the threats of shelter smells and sounds. In addition to normal transitional stress, our animals:

- **HAVE LOST** the important comfort cues (sounds, smells, relationships, routines) found in a home environment (even negative home environments are FAMILIAR -- “better the devil you know than the devil you don’t”)
- **HAVE LOST** the environmental control and freedom to flee from threats found in the stray’s outside world (even the horrors of being a stray include some way to temporarily escape, or hide from, most threats). **This is an especially significant factor for cats, who are more territorial than dogs.**

We cannot provide the routine, sounds, smells, security, and relationships (human and animal) of a home environment. However, we CAN successfully work to identify stressful factors for our animals and reduce (or eliminate) what we can for the time the animals are in our care. Whether an animal is kenneled in our shelter for three days or for thirty, it is part of our responsibility to make that stay as low-stress as possible.

✓ What does he hear?

- How loud is it? How sudden is it? How chaotic is it?
- What kind of history and personality will, or will not, handle this well?

✓ What vibration/air movement does he feel?

- How strong is it? How threatening is it? How stimulating is it? How constant (or sudden) is it?
- What kind of history and personality will, or will not, handle this well?

✓ What does he smell?

- How strong is it? How threatening is it? How stimulating is it? How constant (or sudden) is it?
- What kind of history and personality will, or will not, handle this well?

✓ What (and who!) does he see?

- How threatening is it? How stimulating is it? How constant (or sudden) is it?
- Is there any way for him to hide and/or avoid the sight line?
- What kind of history and personality will, or will not, handle this well?

GENERAL HANDLING REMINDERS

- **DON'T RUSH!!** The less chaotic, the better. A calmer environment produces calmer animals.
- **Talk to the animal**, calmly and softly.
- **Don't go overboard!** Over-stimulation will make your job harder, not easier.
- **Remember** that a "THREAT" doesn't have to be intentional to seem REAL.
- **Always, always, always control** the cat's neck and head, no matter how sweet or small it may be. **HOWEVER: Supporting a cat's weight ONLY by the scruff is not acceptable.**

Rushing an animal produces more stress to the animal and to the situation.

More stress means more unpredictable circumstances, which lead to dangerous situations.

GETTING A CAT OUT OF/INTO A KENNEL

- **Get the cat's attention** before opening the gate.
- **Give the cat the opportunity to check out your fingers** before you pick him up. The cat should come toward you, not the other way around.
- **Don't press your luck!** If you don't feel comfortable removing the cat from his cage, WAIT. If your job requires you to move that cat, use equipment as necessary -- BUT ONLY IF YOU ARE FULLY TRAINED AND YOU ARE COMFORTABLE DOING SO! If you don't feel comfortable removing the cat from his cage, tell your supervisor. (Adoptions staff can explain to the patron that the cat is overstimulated/stressed/etc. -- especially if it is a busy day, with lots of handling -- and ask if you can show another cat first.)
- **Remember that the cat will feel safer**, and you will BE safer, in a firmly held position -- one hand controlling the head and neck, opposite elbow supporting/gripping the hindquarters, and that hand controlling the front feet. Take a moment to re-adjust your grip on the cat if you need to. Exam tables and counters are handy places to rest the cat's feet and support his weight while you get more comfortable.
- **Use distraction**, when possible, to remove a cat from the cage.
- **Control the cat's head and neck** *before* you lift him from the cage **NO MATTER HOW SWEET OR RELAXED HE SEEMS TO BE AT THE MOMENT!** Situations change in the blink of an eye.
- **Keep the cat's feet supporting its weight** as much as possible. Cats prefer "4 on the floor".
- **Try to work with gravity**, not against it. When stretching or restraining, press the cat's weight *down* rather than *up* whenever possible.
- **Keep the cat's face away** from other cats and, in the crowded hallway, away from people; you can use your body to block the cat's line of vision.
- **React quickly** if you see a possible panic attack, fear bite, or bite due to overstimulation. Watch for: enlarged pupils, thrashing tail, growling, hissing, efforts to hide or escape.
- **Don't rush when returning the cat to his cage.** Continue to control the head and neck until the cat's feet are firmly on the cage floor. Throwing him in and slamming the gate is not acceptable.

APPROACHING A FEARFUL CAT -- WHEN IN DOUBT, DON'T!

When approaching a fearful animal, you should make every effort to be as non-threatening as possible. Remember that a caged animal may not show you signs of fear until it feels cornered (i.e. when you close off the only visible exit path). Consider your purpose: Are you evaluating the animal,

attempting socialization, or trying to catch the animal to move and/or treat it? Go only as far as you need to go.

- **Remember that the animal may PERCEIVE a threat**, even when you did not INTEND to threaten.
- **Do not make direct eye contact**. While you obviously need to watch where you are going and what you are doing, direct eye contact is very intimidating and threatening to the animal. Look to the side, above the head, or toward the floor.
- **Approach at the animal's level**. Especially if you are working with a cat who is NOT in a cage, take care not to "loom" over it. Crouch down (bending at the knees) or kneel or sit on the floor; you should be stable in whatever position you choose. When working with a cat in a cage, try to bring your hand in from the bottom, rather than the top, of the cage.
- **Do not reach over the animal's head**. Reach out and touch under the chest or chin, or behind and under the ears, rather than over the head. Allow the cat to sniff your finger first if he wants to investigate you. Cats will generally "tell" you where they prefer your finger to touch them; the jawbone is often selected!
- **Move slowly and deliberately**. Quick, sudden, or tentative movements may produce more fearful reactions. Be sure that the animal sees you.

ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR RESTRAINING CATS IN SURGICAL, TREATMENT, EXAM, & EUTHANASIA SITUATIONS

Cat restraint in these situations is complicated by the invasive procedures, including: SURGERY PREP/SEDATION, EXAMINATION, TREATMENT, AND EUTHANASIA. This does NOT, however, exclude us from using safe handling techniques -- to benefit the cat as well as ourselves.

The most common accidents in these areas stem from rushed handling, overstimulation, tight quarters, and unnecessary chaos.

- WHY are you restraining? What is your purpose/goal? (Exam? Injections? Treatment? Surgical preparation?)
- HOW MANY people (and hands) are cluttering up the situation? Extra hands can either make the job much quicker and easier OR they can make the job much more hazardous and difficult.
- WHERE are you? (what room? is the cat in a kennel, carrier, on a table? What are your options to support the cat?) What can be changed about the environment to reduce stress? (cat's view/eye contact, sounds, vibrations, etc.?) Can **BOTH** people reach the cat and restrain the cat COMFORTABLY? (If you are too short or too tall to comfortably restrain at that height, adjust or get help.)
- WHAT KIND of (and how many) changes/transitions must the cat go through in order to accomplish our purpose? How long has the cat been in that environment, and where did he just come from?
- ◆ Be aware of the animal's point of view AT THAT MOMENT. Animals coming in and out of sedation may feel less certain of surroundings and more threatened.

GOAL: TO GET THE TASK ACCURATELY ACCOMPLISHED WITH THE LEAST STRESS POSSIBLE FOR ALL INVOLVED.