

Back to Basics: Shelter Cat Enrichment

Simple tips and tricks to help your stressed cats come back

BY DEBBIE SWANSON



When Orange Blossom, a 2-year-old female cat, began rubbing her face against the side of her kennel, staff at the Tuscaloosa Metro Animal Shelter became concerned. The friendly cat, who had arrived in early June, soon rubbed her face to the point where her fur was gone and her skin was raw.

"She was a nice cat, very adoptable, but it was just a slow time of year for us," says Linda Workman, assistant director and volunteer director at the Alabama shelter, explaining that the lack of visitors made the cat's stay longer than it should have been.

After receiving medical treatment, Orange Blossom healed and awaited her new home in a cat condo in the front of the building, where staff could keep a closer watch on her, and monitor her stress levels.

The more visible location worked to get her noticed, and in October, she was adopted.

"Her head cleared up, except for a patch of missing hair that may or may not come back," says Workman, who was thrilled to see the sweet-natured cat going home.

Like Orange Blossom, many cats do not adapt well to a shelter environment. But with a little intervention, shelter workers and volunteers can take steps to prevent problems.

Why Enrichment?

Jackson Galaxy, a cat behavior specialist from Los Angeles, Calif., is all too familiar with cats like Orange Blossom. Since the early 1990s, when he began working in shelters in the Denver, Colo., area, he has sympathized with the plight of shelter cats and sought ways to

improve their stays. His philosophy is based on a simple premise: Keep the cat in touch with his basic, natural instincts.

"All cats have an instinct to hunt, kill, and eat prey. For thousands of years, that was who they are. By awakening that, getting them involved in this through play, the cats let off steam. They became happier and more confident," he says.

To do this, he advocates what he refers to as "behavioral CPR." Going beyond simply visiting and petting a cat, he suggests workers and volunteers use play sessions to bring back a cat who sits frozen in the corner of his cage or in his litter box, nonresponsive to people or toys.

If the cat is willing, "take it to a room, and engage in interactive play. Use a wand or toy that you can interact with. If you

[behavior department]

can get the cat to chase and pounce on the toy—that’s your success,” says Galaxy. “That cat will go back to his kennel and feel happier, will start to engage with the people that visit, and hopefully will go home sooner.”

Over the years, Galaxy has shared his methods with numerous rescue organizations and has traveled across the country conducting seminars on shelter animal behavior, with an emphasis on cats. He continues to hear reports back of happier cats and increased adoptions.

While daily play sessions with all resident cats are ideal, Galaxy recognizes limiting factors, such as time and staff, and suggests implementing a triage system. Train workers to identify cats in most need of attention: those who remain in a corner or inside a litter box, ignore visitors, avoid food and/or grooming, or engage in a repetitive or self-destructive behavior. Place higher focus on these cats, while including others as often as possible to ward off future problems.

Another key element is keeping a log for each cat, and making sure each person who interacts with the animals records the day, time, activity, and most importantly, the cat’s reaction.

“Keep quiet music on,” says Linda Workman. “We play classical music, Irish hymns, flute music.” Be mindful of the volume, though—shelters are already noisy.

“This helps at the shelter, but even more importantly, [the information] can go home with the cat,” he says. “This gives the adoptive family information to help them to bond more quickly, and reduces the chances that the cat will be returned to the shelter.”

Slower Steps for the Frightened Cat

Like people, all cats have a unique personality, and what works for one cat



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may not work for the next. Particularly in a shelter setting, many cats arrive afraid and withdrawn, and will not welcome any interaction, play or otherwise.

“When you approach a new cat, see what kind of energy you receive back,” says Galaxy. “If the cat remains cornered in his cage, or takes one step back for every step you take forward, your starting point isn’t to get that cat to play. Your starting point will be to get the cat to come to you.”

In this situation, he suggests what he calls “low value” interaction: Talk to the cat in a soft voice, avoid eye contact, keep hands low or out of sight, and keep at a profile. Avoid positioning yourself in the doorway. “Convince the cat you’re not there to hurt them or trap them.”

Do this several times a day, and instruct other shelter workers to do the same. Keep notes in the cat’s log for each visit.

“Eventually, dangle a toy on a rod to draw the cat to the front of the cage. When you see that cat resume his primitive cat behavior—the hunter in him lights up, he looks at the toy interested, wide-eyed and unblinking—there’s your success.”

Train Your Cat Visitors

People often volunteer to walk shelter dogs, but few ask to come in and play with cats. The culprit is often a simple lack of public awareness. Many people don’t realize that shelter cats need TLC, and volunteers may be unsure of how to interact with cats in a helpful, soothing way.

If your shelter is low on cat visitors, reach out to the public. You might start with local cat fancy and rescue groups, who’ll already have good feline experience, and see if they might be able to provide some training for your less cat-savvy volunteers. Spread the word in the community and among your supporters, identifying what a typical cat visit entails. Spotlight a particular cat in need to help people make a connection. Use your newsletter to explain the kind of socialization that shelter cats need.

Once you’ve built up some volunteers, the next step is training. Brushing, patting, and snuggling with the cats is helpful, but it’s also important to have interactive play sessions. Also, teach them not to simply accept a withdrawn cat.

“When you see a shy, withdrawn cat, the human response is to cuddle or talk to the

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"Disposable cardboard scratching posts, or scraps of carpet from installers, can help a cat get some exercise [and] mark his territory," suggests Kellie Snider.

cat," says Bob Andrusco, a behavior specialist at McHenry County Animal Control in Illinois, "To the cat, that's rewarding his shy behavior. Instead, redirect the cat to an activity." For example, Andrusco says, you can toss a ball or play with a laser toy; when the cat reacts to it, then reward her. That way, Andrusco says, the cat will learn that outgoing behavior brings on attention.

Small Steps Can Make Big Changes

It's a fact that a typical kennel doesn't yield much space, but there are things you can do to help a cat feel more comfortable. Kellie Snider, manager of animal behavior programs at the SPCA of Texas, says the staff members have found some ways to expand their resident cats' sense of real estate.

"One of our veterinarians, Dr. Shawn Ashley, thought of adding a shelf to offer more square footage and give cats a way to get away from the litter box. Now most of our cats choose to lay on top of the shelf, where they can stretch out, have some privacy, and be farther away from their litter boxes," says Snider.

The shelves have proved successful with most cats, but Snider says a few still opt to sit in the litter box. For these kitties, staff will often add a shoebox to the kennel; the cat can then crawl inside to sleep or simply feel more secure.

Another issue with many cats is their desire to have their litter box separate from their feeding and sleeping area. Place cats' bowls and litter boxes as far from each other as possible within a cage. Within smaller caging units, try hanging a curtain or privacy wall down the center of the cage, or giving the cat a box to climb in that will allow him to separate himself from his toilet area.

"If you can give a cat a hiding space, they can have a place to rest, de-stress," says Snider. "There is some logical concern that if a cat is hiding he won't be adopted, but it's also important to think about the well-being of the cat."

If the cat is hiding too frequently and missing out on visiting opportunities, take steps to draw the cat out, or remove the hiding spot periodically during public visiting hours.

Reach Out for Donations

At the Tuscaloosa Metro Animal Shelter, public kindness and donations have gone a long way toward making the cats' living quarters more comfortable.

"My grandmother crochets rectangular pads for the cats, and they love to lay on them," Workman reports. Spreading the word among senior citizens' organizations or knitting supply stores may yield a similar outburst of comfortable resting spots for your feline residents.

"If you have a cat room available for playing, try to mimic a home environment. Our larger cat room has a couch, chair, and TV," says Bob Andrusco.

"We also use donated pieces of rug, paper bags from grocery stores, pillowcases from hotels," Workman reports. "People are willing to help, if you ask them." Other potential donated materials include shoe boxes for hiding spots and shelving material.

It can be difficult to find the time and resources to reach out to each cat in your care. But sometimes just a few changes can help break the cycle for a feline dealing with stress or depression. Happier cats and quicker adoptions will reward the entire shelter community. [AS](#)