FEAR-FREE WORKSHOP:
FEAR FREE FELINE HANDLING, EXAMINATION, AND TREATMENT
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Introduction
Understanding the cat and the causes of its fear surrounding the veterinary visit can help us improve the experience for patients, clients, and team members. As solitary hunters, cats must protect themselves and avoid danger, but unfortunately everything associated with the veterinary visit – carrier, car, the handling and the practice environment – all spell danger to the cat.

Recognizing the causes of fear surrounding the veterinary visit, and taking measures to prevent fear at each stage will facilitate the experience for all involved. Fear starts before the cat arrives at the veterinary practice, making client education an important aspect of our care. The practice environment and respectful handling techniques reduce fear.

Cats have a heightened fear response that acts as an important protective mechanism in threatening or unfamiliar situations such as veterinary visits. Recognizing how the individual patient reacts to fear (i.e., attempting to hide, run away, or show aggression) and developing handling techniques specific to the different fear responses improves patient outcomes and prevents injury for all involved.

Understanding the cat and why it is fearful
Cats are solitary hunters, who have retained many of the behaviors of their wild ancestors, Felis sylvestris lybica.\textsuperscript{1,2} They must maintain their physical health and avoid danger, to remain successful hunters of multiple small meals each day. They do so through protective mechanisms, which include territoriality, heightened fear response, keen senses, and communication. The cat has a heightened fear response that is used to protect or distance self from potential danger.

The territorial cat: Maintaining familiar territory allows a sense of control over the cat’s physical and social environment, increasing security and reducing stress.\textsuperscript{3,4} Taking the cat out of its familiar territory or having an unfamiliar individual enter their territory – for example, to go to the vet or for the vet to go to the home – can lead to fear.

Heightened fear response:\textsuperscript{5} Three major responses may be exhibited in response to a potential threat, which are avoidance (fleeing), inhibition (freezing), and repulsion (aggression).\textsuperscript{6} Cats that are fearful are often inactive and quieter,\textsuperscript{7} attempting to protect themselves from potential threat by trying to hide (freeze). Fear responses can change quickly based on how we respond to the cat. For example, if we provide a space such as the bottom half of the carrier or a tall-sided cat bed for the inhibited, quieter, and less active cat to feel hidden, we can prevent escalation of fear and aggression. If the cat flees to avoid the situation, attempts to capture the cat will increase fear as well as the potential for aggression. If the cat is already aggressive, it should be addressed with a different approach.

Feline senses are adapted for both self-protection and successful hunting. These keen senses are often superior to ours and can lead to increased fear during veterinary visits. Because the cat’s
vision is specialized to identify rapid movements to successfully catch prey, rapid movements occurring in the veterinary hospital can arouse fear. Cats can hear very high frequencies including the ultrasonic chatter of rodents. Loud and unfamiliar sounds can be frightening. Most importantly, the cat has an acute sense of smell, and feline pheromones are important in feline communication. Unfamiliar scents can frighten and arouse cats. Providing familiar scents such as that of a favorite person can help a cat adapt to new situations. Synthetic feline facial pheromone analog mimics the natural pheromone that is deposited when a cat rubs its face on objects, and has been shown to provide a calming effect in unfamiliar or stressful environments or situations.

Feline communication acts to prevent altercations with other cats over food and territory, and avoid the risks of active fighting. Fighting only occurs when other means of communication have failed. Cats communicate with a range of subtle body postures, facial expressions, and tail positions to diffuse tension and avoid physical contact with unfamiliar cats. Body postures help us identify a fearful cat from a medium-ranged distance. Facial signals, especially changes in pupils and ear position, change more rapidly than body postures and provide more immediate indications of a cat’s fear and aggression level.

Understanding the cat and its fears surrounding the veterinary visit

There are many stages of the veterinary visit that can result in fear. Many cats are fearful by the time they get to the veterinary practice. Others become fearful during examination or hospitalization. Potential causes of feline fear are noted in Table 1, starting at home with the owner’s unusual behavior trying to get the cat into the carrier and their own stress negatively impacting the cat.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes of Feline Fear</th>
<th>Owners's Unusual Behavior</th>
<th>Cat forced into carrier</th>
<th>Restraint</th>
<th>Smells at clinic</th>
<th>Sounds at clinic</th>
<th>Cat communication not being understood</th>
<th>Car ride</th>
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Preventing fear prior to the veterinary visit
Client education
Client education to facilitate veterinary visits should start during the first veterinary appointments. Owners should be instructed about socialization their cat through positive experiences with people, and how to perform home maintenance procedures (e.g., nail trimming) at home.

Carrier training at this early stage of adoption – regardless of the cat’s age – can prevent fear associated with the carrier and the stress of owners chasing their cat to catch it and then shoving it into a carrier.

Also make clients aware that their stress can make their cat more fearful, and that a calm attitude surrounding the veterinary experience can reduce the stress of the visit for both the cat and themselves.

Carrier training:
Educate cat owners to keep the carrier in a room where the cat likes to be so that it becomes familiar. Soft bedding, preferably with the cat’s or favored owners scent, should be placed within the carrier. Most importantly, instruct owners to allow the cat a sense of control or choice to enter the carrier instead of encouraging them to go near or into the carrier. Positive reinforcement through treats will entice the cat to enter the carrier of its own accord. It may take days to weeks, but it will prevent a lifetime of fear associated with the carrier.

Travel should be on an empty stomach to prevent motion sickness, and increase interest in treats at the veterinary hospital, allowing for a more positive experience. A synthetic feline facial pheromone (FFP) analog sprayed into the carrier at least 30 minutes before travel, has a calming effect on the cat. Draping a blanket over the carrier can also help prevent fear and motion sickness. If the cat is still nauseous – lip-licking, drooling, or vomiting during transportation - maropitant (Cerenia) is recommended to prevent motion-sickness. Anti-anxiety medication may also be needed (see future visits).

Making the visit flow more smoothly from beginning to end

The waiting area: The cat should be taken directly into the examination room if at all possible. If it must be in the waiting area, provide a separate cat waiting area, and place the carrier on a chair or table, and facing away from other animals and with a towel to cover the carrier. Use Feli-way on the towel and in each location of the hospital where cats may go.

The history: If the cat is not highly aroused when placed in the exam room, allow the cat a sense of control by obtaining the history with the carrier on the floor, and with the door open so that the cat can come out and inspect the environment on its own. If the cat is highly aroused, cover the carrier with a large towel – either one from home or one sprayed with feline pheromone analog spray – over the carrier to block the cat’s vision of us.

Examination: Examine the cat where it chooses to be – on a lap, on the floor, a bench or in the bottom half of the carrier. Many cats prefer to remain in the bottom half of the carrier for as much of the examination as possible. Some cats do well also on our lap or the lap of the client’s as long as the cat is calm in their lap. When we sit on a stool near the client with the cat in our lap, we are now on the same physical level as the client (as most clients tend to sit on the chairs/benches in the exam rooms), which creates the sense of being an equal partner with the
client in the care of their cat. This increases value and respect by the client for what we do and how we do it. When we are standing and the client is sitting, the height difference is huge, conveying different levels that can create a barrier to engaging the client. Also, without a physical barrier, such as an exam table between us, the communication is more open.

To prevent both fear and pain, it is best to take the cat out of the carrier only once; for example, the exam can be done in the bottom half of the carrier, ending with the weight. After weighing, collect lab samples if indicated. It is much less stressful for the feline patient if lab samples are collected in the examination room instead of the treatment area. Once a cat has acclimated to one room, the stress of moving to another alerts the cat once again to potential danger, increasing blood pressure and other parameters.

If the client brings in more than one cat for an examination, and the cats are not getting along well in the unfamiliar environment, or if one cat is very stressed, separate the cats into different examination rooms, and work with each individually. Discuss the potential problems and how to deal with them if the cats still don’t get along well when they return home.

**Lab sample collection:** Collect samples with the least amount of people and minimal handling. Usually only one holder is needed. Speak softly or distract with food, treats, or toys. Allow the cat to remain in a natural position, and without stretching or holding legs tightly; this prevents both pain and fear. Have a blanket or something soft for them to lie on, preferably one that smells like home. Older, arthritic, and underweight cats are especially uncomfortable on cold and hard surfaces, and need thick padding or fleece underneath them. Gently wrapping the cat in a towel can increase security.

Senior cats and cats of any age with chronic kidney disease or hyperthyroidism should have blood pressures measurements taken. Blood pressure should be measured before other diagnostic tests, while keeping the patient as relaxed and calm as possible to avoid white coat hypertension. The environment should be quiet, away from other animals and generally have the owner present. Measuring blood pressure is usually best conducted in the exam room, rather than in the treatment area, because it takes 5-10 minutes for the cat to acclimate to a new room; obtaining the history and performing the examination prior to blood pressure measurement will take approximately that time, allowing the cat to adapt to the exam room.

It is best to collect all lab samples in the examination room to prevent additional fear for the cat. Many clients prefer to watch blood pressure evaluation, venipuncture, and cystocentesis instead of worrying about what’s happening to their cat “in the back”. It is great client education and increases perception of value. If the client prefers not to watch, they can wait in the reception area while samples are collected in the exam room. When all procedures are completed, allow the cat to return to the carrier if it wishes to while the client is educated about necessary treatments and next veterinary visits.

The above applies as well if fine needle aspirates or samples for a dermatologic workup are taken. Pain relief should be given if these conditions are painful.
Radiographs: Since more exact positioning needs to occur for radiographs, pre-treating with buprenorphine is helpful. Sedation is indicated for fear aggressive cats and those that still resist handling despite opioid treatment.

**General handling principles to reduce feline fear**
The following handling principles will improve the veterinary visit for all involved:

- Give the cat a sense of control.
- The fewer the handlers, the better.
- Stay calm and speak in a soft voice.
- Move slowly to obtain quicker results.
- Do not stare at the cat, but rather look from the side or “wink”.
- Cats like the familiar – train the cat to the carrier and have owner bring what’s familiar.
- Scent is important in the cat’s world - use synthetic feline pheromones and eliminate scents that are offensive to the cat.
- Cats prefer to be massaged or petted around the face – under the chin, in the cheek area, and between the ears – always try to do this instead of scruffing or “clipping”, which don’t allow the cat a sense of control.
- Cats want places to hide (boxes, towels or blankets, tall-sided cat beds)
- When cats feel more secure, they also like places to perch to oversee their environment (kitty condominiums, the top of a box, shelf, etc.
- Reward desired behavior – punishment usually exacerbates the problem
- Stand to the side instead of looming over the cat – we are big and scary! – when getting out of a carrier or cage.

**Getting a cat out of a cage**
If cats have options of hiding places and perches, they will be more secure in the environment, and there are other options to remove the cat from the cage instead of pulling the cat out of the cage against its will. If the cat is in a cat bed or basket, remove the bedding as well so that the cat can remain in the bedding.

Stand to the side of the cage instead of in front of the cage, which can be threatening to the cat. Put your hand out calmly and slowly and let the cat choose whether it wants to come to you, and even rub on you. Then gently and calmly remove the cat from the carrier.

**Preventing fear at future visits**
Alprazolam and gabapentin are both medications that are helpful to prevent fear or anxiety at future veterinary visits. The author’s preferred medication is gabapentin,100mg per cat given 90 minutes prior to the veterinary visit.

**Differentiating handling based on fear responses**
Recognizing the cat’s 3 major fear responses – what we would see is hiding vs. fleeing vs. aggression - and developing specific handling techniques individualized to the response prevents human and feline injury.
Differentiating between fearful and non-fearful cats is also important - and more complicated than it sounds – so that we can reduce fear or help the non-fearful cat continue to have positive veterinary experiences. Developing handling techniques based on the different fear responses greatly improves the veterinary experience and safety of all.

**Handing the non-fearful cat**
The primary goals of working with non-fearful cats is to prevent fear during the current and subsequent veterinary visits. These patients should still be provided with respectful handling, and a safe and comfortable environment. Even if the cat appears affectionate and content, provide an option for hiding and offer treats to distract the cat. Since a sense of control increases security, allow the cat to choose to remain in the carrier or to come out on its own to inspect the exam room.

Kittens and cats that are not fearful can often be distracted with canned food, treats, or baby food given during examination and procedures. Many cats enjoy catnip that can be offered unless it is known that it will increase arousal. Some cats, and especially kittens, will enjoy playing with toys during the visit.

Client education to carrier train cats will further the prevention of fear during upcoming veterinary visits. This is on by making the carrier a comfortable resting area in the home, and reinforcing and rewarding with treats. For more information, see the previous proceedings, ‘Understanding the Cat and Owner and Getting Them Back into Your Practice’. Encourage clients to also bring familiar bedding or cat bed, treats, or toys to future visits to increase positive veterinary experiences. Pheromone therapy may also be helpful.

**Handling the fearful cat that tries to hide or ‘freezes’ (inhibition)**
The most important step to take with these patients is to provide a hiding place. It is important to recognize that hiding is an important coping strategy when a cat feels threatened, such as in an unfamiliar environment. Hiding means that the cat is hidden so that it does not need to see us; this is usually best by facing the cat so that the head is looking forward or hidden within a towel, while the handler works from behind or the side. A preferred option is to allow the cat to remain in the bottom half of the carrier if the cat has not ventured out of its own accord. A towel may also be used to cover the carrier so that the cat does not need to see the unfamiliar. Other hiding options are a cat bed with high sides or an igloo shape, or a towel loosely surrounding the cat.

As with the non-fearful cat, carrier training, bringing familiar and favored items from home and use of pheromone therapy can help comfort the fearful cat. Anti-anxiety medication may be indicated.

**Handling the cat that ‘flees’**
Chasing a cat that flees will exacerbate fear and increase the potential for self-protective aggression. Instead of chasing or trying to catch the cat, give the cat time to calm down and the option to return to the carrier. Decreasing arousal can take time, and it is often best to keep the cat for awhile in a calm environment and with treats placed on the floor and in the carrier.
If the owner does not wish to leave the cat or if the cat is highly aroused, another option is to reschedule the appointment in addition to providing client education about carrier training and bringing familiar objects to the visit. These cats often require an anxiolytic for upcoming visits.

Handling the aggressive cat
It is important to remember why the cat is aggressive. This is not a ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ cat, but rather a frightened cat that is attempting to protect self. More subtle signs are often displayed but go unrecognized until aggression occurs. Sedation or anesthesia should be administered to prevent potential injury and exacerbated fear and anxiety at future visits.

Don’t forget pain
Many cats are painful rather than fearful and recognizing the signs of pain and treating or preventing the pain is essential. Giving analgesia preemptively or at the first sign of pain is always best.

Helpful resources:
Rodan I, Heath S, Feline Behavioral Health and Welfare, Ed. Elsevier, Publ. 9/2015 – 3 chapters on handling cats – the fearful cat, the cat in pain, and the challenging cat. Also, chapters on the practice environment, including the reception area, exam room, and hospitalization and boarding areas.

Rodan I, Sundahl E, et al, AAFP and ISFM Feline-Friendly Handling Guidelines

AAFP Cat Friendly Practice

CATalyst Council Handling Videos
The Best Place to Examine a Cat: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izUsUH5SRUM&feature=relmfu
Massage to calm an anxious cat: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-IPmWTa_0o&feature=relmfu
Tips for handling a fearful cat: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZDSoYyMs9Y&feature=channel&list=UL
Handling a Cat for Lab Sample Collection: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8iAexzg710&feature=relmfu
Getting a cat out of a cage: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xr5W91nFK4M&feature=relmfu

Cats and Carriers: Friends not Foes: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RGY5oSKVfo&feature=channel&list=UL
Cat Clicker Training into Carrier with Dr. Jacqui Neilson and Bug: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRGKJ8FCH94&feature=channel&list=UL and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6Bz6K6HqXg&feature=channel&list=UL
Tips for taking your cat to the veterinarian: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAAJTCX0zI&feature=channel&list=UL

References