



The Five Pillars of a Healthy Feline Environment

Why is this important?

Providing a healthy environment and key resources for your feline friend can bring comfort in the home and reduce stress. Stress can bring on not only unwanted behavioral problems but also stress induced illnesses. Recognizing and correcting these signs of stress will lead to harmonious balance in the home.

Pillar #1 – Providing a Safe Space

Cats feel more comfortable when they feel safe from potential threats. A safe, comfortable spot can look a bit different for each cat. Here are some tips to incorporate into your home that might help:

- o Elevation – Most cats prefer spots that are elevated where they can get a good view of the whole room and of any potential threats. An elevated spot can be a cat tree, a window perch, cat shelves etc.
- o A spot to hide – Some cats feel safer when they're invisible. Consider a box with cozy blankets, hidey holes, under beds, cozy bed in a closet etc. These hideaway spots should be away from household traffic and loud noises.
- o *Safe spots* should have multiple entries to avoid being blocked by potential threats (ex: other pets blocking the way, loud noises etc.)
- o Multi-pet households should include as many *safe spots* as there are pets, and they should all be separate to avoid competition and pets fighting for the spot.

Pillar #2 – Provide Multiple and Separate KEY Environmental Resources

Key resources include food, feeding areas, drinking spots, beds & *safe spots*, litter boxes, claw scratching spots, play time and the owner.

- o **Food and Feeding Areas:** Cats feel safer when they don't have to look over their shoulder while eating. Having another pet (or potential threat) present could lead to decreased eating or fighting amongst pets in multi-cat households. Each feeding spot should be separate from other pets and out of view from each other to

decrease stress.

Meal feeding is strongly recommended vs. free feeding. This will allow for the owner to keep track of how much food is ingested should the cat ever become ill and suddenly stop eating. It will also help to maintain a healthy weight and eating out of boredom.

- **Drinking Spots** – It is recommended to have multiple drinking areas around the house. Water fountains can encourage cats to drink more water and benefit their urinary health.
- **Beds and Safe Spots** – As discussed in the previous chapter, consider having multiple *Safe Spots* throughout the house to provide variety.
- **Litter Boxes** – The rule of thumb is to have as many litter boxes as there are cats plus an additional box. To avoid inappropriate elimination due to stress, boxes should be separated and on multiple levels of the house. Please contact your veterinarian if your cat eliminates out of the box, strains to urinate or vocalizes excessively while in the litter box. These could be signs of underlying medical issues and should be addressed immediately.
- **Claw Scratching Spots** – Many people see scratching as an undesirable behavior. Cats use pheromones to mark their territory and to say, “I feel comfortable here”. Cats might try to scratch more often if they feel stressed. It is strongly recommended to provide designated scratching spots to avoid scratching on furniture. Each cat might have different preferences for scratching spots – horizontal vs. vertical, rope vs. cardboard etc. Multi-cat households should have as many scratching areas as there are cats for optimal comfort. Scratching also helps to shed old nails. Keeping your cat’s nails trimmed short can help with undesirable scratching. Nail Caps can be used in lieu of elective declawing surgeries, which are no longer recommended unless medically indicated. Please talk to your RVT if you have additional questions on this subject.
- **The Owner** – Believe it or not, you are one of your cat’s KEY resources. Cats will seek out their owner for attention and play. Each cat should have individual play and bonding time with the owner. Interactions with your cat should not be forced. Cats feel more comfortable when they can control the interaction with their owner.

Things to Keep in Mind:

- Cats should have free access to resources without being challenged.
- Spreading out the resources will expand the cat’s territory. More space = less stress.
- By nature, cats are solitary creatures, but they will band together for grooming which is a group activity. Interactions with other cats should not be forced.
- Synthetic Pheromones (Feliway) are recommended to reduce stress and encourage harmony within the home. These products can be purchased in the form of a spray or room diffuser.
- Cats will be more likely to live in harmony if they have sufficient access to Key

Resources.

Pillar #3 – Provide Opportunity for Play and Predatory Behavior

Cats should be able to engage in pseudo-predatory play and feeding behaviors. Encourage your cat to hunt for its food to mimic predatory instinct. Here are a few ideas:

- o Rod with feather toy: allowing your cat to “catch” the feather then rewarding with a treat.
- o Food puzzles to encourage mental stimulation (many varieties are available for purchase, or you can create your own DIY food puzzle).
- o Scattering kibbles on the ground and allowing your cat to chase after them.

Things to keep in mind:

- Allowing cats to aggressively play with hands should be discouraged to avoid unwanted biting behavior.
- Food puzzles and play feeders should be rotated to prevent your cat from getting bored. It should always be a challenge!
- Older cats should still be encouraged to participate in these activities, but the intensity of play might need to be modified.
- Any toys with small parts or strings should be safely put away when playtime is over to avoid ingestion.

Pillar #4 – Provide Positive, Consistent and Predictable Human-Cat Social Interaction

Cats thrive on routine and benefit from regular, friendly, predictable interactions with humans.

- Consider regular, timed feedings
- Allow your cat to initiate - they can choose and control the type of interaction that they prefer.
- Avoid fixed, intimidating eye contact. Cats can communicate their comfort and happiness through soft half-closed eyes, why not communicate with them in the same way?
- Each cat has individual preferences; take the time to get to know your cat’s needs to develop a strong bond!
- Provide individual bonding time with your cat without interruption from other pets.
- Your cat’s needs might change with age (ex: older cats might prefer petting vs. getting picked up). Be sure to adapt with your cat’s changing needs and contact your veterinarian if you have any concerns.

Pillar #5 – Provide an Environment that Respects the Importance of the Cat’s Sense of Smell

Cats have a sixth sense! They possess a vomeronasal organ that can process chemical information (pheromones) to assess their environment. They use pheromonal signals to communicate through marking (facial and body rubbing). These markings establish the boundaries of their living area and where they feel safe. Whenever possible, it is important to not interfere with these markings. Consider rotating bedding when it needs to be washed to maintain the cat’s personal scent.

Cats have scent glands located in the perioral area (near whiskers), in their cheeks, temporal area (forehead near ears), interdigital (toe beans), caudal scent glands (near hind end) and tail scent glands. You might notice your cat rubbing its cheeks on wall corners, on your hands while you’re petting them, or rubbing along your legs. They are communicating with you through scent marking.

How to respect your cat’s sense of smell:

- Avoid using strong scented cleaners or perfumed products.
- Avoid using scented litter.
- Use synthetic pheromones in your home.
- Consider cleaning their bedding on rotation to not eliminate their smell.

Cats are very sensitive to change. Reach out to your veterinarian if ever you notice a change in their behavior, appetite, litter box habits or if you have any concerns.