

Dr. Kim's feline mews



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City living can make you CRAZY even if you are a Cat (also called The Concept of "Four Points of Contact")

Have you ever thought about how different our world is today for our pets? We often complain about our 'speeded up lives', and the loss of community and recreational spaces. How often do you get to a spontaneous backyard barbie anymore? Well, it's even harder for your pets. If upwards of 10% of Sydney-siders can't cope (which is the 'old name' for the modern epidemic of depression..), then it is really not surprising that a similar number of cats can't cope with the new rules of city living.

For Millennia, cats lived in small communities of related females, with males visiting seasonally to do what men do. Kittens were raised communally, and not many survived. Evenings were spent hunting for mice and rats, and avoiding bigger predators. Life was pretty short and brutal (wild cats only live to about 5 years old), and filled with parasites (internal and external), poisons and other dangers.

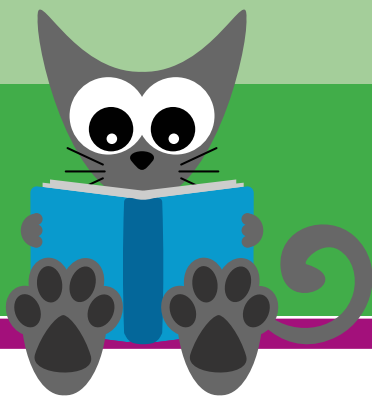
On the up side, it was a mile between cats, males covered the territory of three to ten female colonies, plus interaction between 'outsider' cats was infrequent and usually made via smell (urine and facial pheromones).

Today, our cats are confined, castrated and made to

interact with lots of humans and other cats. Their lives have been radically changed, and the thing to remember is how well most cats have adapted. However, we seem to see nearly every one of the ones that can't cope, because they get their owner's attention by peeing around the place (including on their owner's heads in rare instances... that's guaranteed to get a reaction!). Or else they regularly fight with other cats or people, spend their lives hiding, or pee blood in the bathtub. I sometimes wonder if there is an earlier stage that these cats go through trying to get their message across, but we don't get the message till the signs are blatant!

Fortunately, we are getting cluier about cats, and there are a number of 'behavior modifying' drugs and techniques to help the 'stressed out kitty'. Antidepressants are the big step forward, but we are actually moving in on the 'smell' front as well (with Feliway and Felifriend). Returning to the 'natural state' of cats, most messages came via the nose, so triggering 'happy thoughts' via 'good smells' (eg pheromones) is starting to get a look in. In the recent past, cats were 'bombed out' of caring about their problems with sedatives, in much the same way as housewives in 'Valium Valley' used to be – no progress with the problem made, but the symptoms disappear. These days for cats, instigating a bit of behavioral therapy also helps – structuring 'playtime' and 'feeding times' into regular and reliable events reduces the anxiety that a lot of cats feel when their owners are away or have irregular timetables. Our cats are much more likely to spend the majority of their day indoors now, and this promotes longevity and physical health. However, it does place a greater burden to care for the mental health of the cat on the owner rather than the environment.

Hardly anyone lets their kids walk to school alone (or even walk there at all), nor lets them play on the roads either – and very sensible too. However, it means that the energy that was used up in running about outside for kids and cats has to be redirected. Some cats redirect appropriately, some don't. Some breeds of cats cope better with a sedentary existence than others. However, all of the cats who have problems are much-loved, and it is nice to be able to either modify the environment so the cat can cope (eg tell the boyfriend to leave – and 85% of cat owners would!), or modify the cat's response to stress by raising their anxiety threshold (with drugs). I've observed that no cat ever changed – there has to be change around them so that they can cope! It was ever thus – dogs get trained, cats train their owners (but only 'for our own good'... well maybe not purely..).



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Continued...

It has been shown that antidepressants don't work nearly as well if there is no effort applied to changing the environment and routine for the cat so it can cope better. We used to 'randomise' interactions with cats, on the basis that Nature had no timetable. However, that turns out to be wrong for cats, and we need to treat them more like they are 'in gaol' – i.e. guarantee structure in their day.

There are riots in gaol if dinner is late, and the inmates are not happy if they don't get their exercise time. It is the same for cats, and especially the stressed ones. They need to know that they will get your FULL ATTENTION four times a day – two feeding times and two playtimes.

More specifically, the feeding times need to be the same (within three minutes!) whether it is during the week, the weekend or holidays, and they need to be when you are 'leaving' so the cat looks forward to your departure rather than being anxious about your return. Thus, breakfast is put out when you leave for work (not when you get up in the morning – this stops most of the 'cat as alarm clock' problem also), and in the evening when you go to bed (rather than when you walk through the door). Your cat will then have a few more 'cues' about feed time and won't be anxious that you have forgotten. Remember, cats pee in strange places when they are anxious or need to get our attention badly, so effort put into the 'timetable' will have many unseen rewards also!

The two playtimes, especially for indoor cats, should be 20 minutes long (and that is like 20 minutes on an exercise bicycle – it can feel like forever!), and pairs of cats should have individual games with you at least some of the time. Remember, they selfishly (like all our relatives..!) want our FULL AND UNDIVIDED ATTENTION at least sometimes.

The two playtimes need to be at approximately the same time each day also. That way, the cat saves up energy for it rather than pestering you ALL the time.

If your cat likes grooming (and most cats do if it doesn't hurt them – some will even 'self groom' against a comb you hold for them), then you can use some of the playtime as 'bonding time' with grooming, especially for older cats who think you're nuts if you want to play with toys for 20 minutes!

One of the essential things to remember, is you don't have to get it completely correct all of the time. It is amazing how much pressure is relieved by even being aware of the cat's needs – for structure, routine and affection – and that by instigating even little changes, a great deal can be achieved for your cat's mental and emotional health!!