

The URI Challenge

Keeping shelter cats healthy through stress reduction

BY DONNA MLINEK

Upper respiratory infection is a common occurrence in shelter cats, but is it inevitable? Good sanitation and infectious disease control are essential prevention measures, but healthy immune systems can help cats resist the (hopefully) small amounts of viruses we cannot eradicate from the environment.

Stress depresses a cat's immune system to the point where he is less able to ward off URI viruses and the accompanying secondary bacterial infections—and unfortunately, shelters are very stressful places for cats. The finer points of stress reduction methods will vary greatly from shelter to shelter, depending on physical layouts, available resources, and staffing limitations. But considering what stresses a cat and what makes a cat feel safer can help you develop a plan for your shelter that will minimize stress for the cats in your care.

Subtracting the Stressors

We all know what cats find stressful. We just need to think about it in the context of a cat's life in the shelter. At the Dumb Friends League in Denver, we are analyzing our processes, movement of animals, and use of space with cat stress factors in mind. Think about what you can do in your own shelter to eliminate or minimize the following stressors:

Other cats

- Cats can be stressed by the mere presence of other cats, especially when they can see them at relatively close range. At the Dumb Friends League, we examine the placement of kennel banks and the use of physical barriers; for example, we try to place banks of Snyder kennels back to back, rather than facing one another.
- Think about the kinds of cats you house together. If feral or very unso-



cialized cats are housed near more laid-back cats, the sounds and smells of the fearful cats can cause stress for the easygoing ones.

- Remember to monitor colony cats carefully for signs of fearfulness. Colonies are advantageous when they reduce the stress of shelter cats, but if we overcrowd them or allow ongoing conflicts among cats in a colony, they can become far more stressful than individual housing.

Welcome to The Behavior Department! In this space, a series of experts will sound off on best practices, ongoing controversies, and exciting developments in **animal behavior training, stress reduction, temperament testing, and related topics**. If you have a question you'd like our authors to address, contact us at asm@hsus.org.

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In her new role as an animal projects manager at the **Dumb Friends League** in Denver, Colorado, **Donna Mlinek** is responsible for helping the organization fulfill its long-term strategic plan for cats. She has also worked extensively with dogs during her nine years at the shelter. As a **Humane Society University** instructor and a teacher in the Pets for Life program, she has taught courses on adoption-matching, behavior evaluation, stress reduction, kennel enrichment, and behavior helplines. Mlinek highly recommends that all shelters view **The Emotional Life of Cats**, a DVD created by Nadine Gourkow of the British Columbia SPCA.

Dogs

Where in your shelter are cats exposed to dogs? If cats can see dogs going by, consider covering their cages or creating physical barriers so the dogs won't be visible. If barking dogs are always audible to the cats, consider using a white noise machine or playing classical music to block out the noise.

Changes of environment

Cats feel safest when they are familiar with their surroundings. Every time you move a cat from one place to another, the displacement causes stress. Think about how you can minimize moving cats from cage to cage. For example, does a cat really need to be moved out of its cage during daily cleaning?

Adding Stress Relief

There are also things that make cats feel safer. Consider these "security blankets" for cats and how you can create them in your shelter:

Hiding

When a cat is anxious about something, his instinct is to flee or hide. Since fleeing is not an option in a shelter cage, it is imperative that we provide a hiding place for the cat. We use shoeboxes for this purpose; every cat gets one upon intake. The box is deep enough for the cat to feel hidden, but it still allows visibility for patrons. Many adoption kennels leave cats feeling exposed because they are open on both the front and back sides. Draping a towel over the back side (leaving a small opening for the cat to see and be seen) can help make the cat feel safer. Partially covering the front side of a Plexiglas kennel window with a decorative opaque window film can also help.

Scent

Having their own scent around makes cats feel more comfortable—that's why they go to all that trouble to mark things. When cleaning cages, it is important to leave some of the cat's scent in the cage instead of eradicating all of it through daily deep-cleaning. When the cat must be moved, move something

that smells like him (a towel or box) to his new hangout.

High places

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Pheromones

Feliway is a synthetic version of the pheromone cats leave when they "face-mark." Since cats face-mark when they are happy, this pheromone is believed to lower stress. If your shelter has a high rate of air exchange, the plug-in diffuser version of Feliway may not be effective (and intact males reportedly feel the need to overmark the constantly dispersed pheromone, which could increase their stress). We use the spray version, but this requires a plan for usage. You might want to assign certain staff or volunteers to walk through cat areas twice a day and apply the Feliway in the kennels of cats who appear stressed. Feliway can be sprayed on any absorbent object, and it is best to spray the object outside of the kennel before placing it with the cat.

Human Companionship

Interactive play can relieve stress, as can grooming. Our volunteer Kitty Comfort squad grooms cats and plays with them in their cages and in colony rooms. They also provide cats with toys and scratching opportunities. We get carpet square samples donated by carpet stores to use as scratching pads. Toys and scratching posts must be disinfected or disposable so they do not become carriers of infection.

A clean, accessible litter box

Litter boxes should be cleaned frequently enough that cats don't avoid using them for long periods of time. If possible, provide an extra-large box for your extra-large cats. In a colony room, make sure there are enough litter boxes so that no cat can prevent others from using one.



Routines

Having a predictable schedule gives cats some feeling of control over their world. Consider whether cleaning and feeding can be done at about the same time each day. If possible, have the same people work with the cats so they become familiar with their caretakers.

Sleep cycles

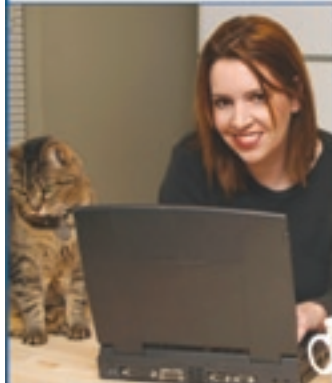
We all know that cats sleep—a lot. The busy shelter environment disrupts a cat's natural sleep patterns. Take an after-hours walk through the shelter, turn off any indoor lights or music that didn't get turned off, and check for security lights that may shine directly into cats' kennels. This helps ensure the cats get peaceful, uninterrupted nighttime rest.

Through the "URI Challenge" we've initiated to address these concerns, we believe we can decrease the likelihood of upper respiratory infection—and reduce the severity of its effects when it does occur—by working to make our shelter less stressful for cats. We challenge your shelter to do the same. Good luck! AS

Read All About It at [AnimalSheltering.org!](http://AnimalSheltering.org)

- For more information about **spot-cleaning a cat cage**, see the "101" in the May-June 2005 issue (www.AnimalSheltering.org/spotcleaning) and "The Doc Is In" column in the Nov-Dec 2004 issue (www.AnimalSheltering.org/salmonella).
- To read a review of **The Emotional Life of Cats video**, see the "Scoop" section in the May-June 2004 issue (www.AnimalSheltering.org/emotionallifeofcats).
- To learn more about **the work of Nadine Gourkow**, read a Q&A with her in the Jan-Feb 2005 issue (www.AnimalSheltering.org/gourkow).

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