



7-1-1982

Cat Behavior: Facts and Myths

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Cats have been companion animals for thousands of years. Ancient Egyptians held them sacred and protected them by law. Throughout history people in many parts of the world have valued them for companionship and their ability to control rodent pests. Cats figured in fairy tales, and in modern times have inspired cartoons and many books. Today, cats, ranging in size and color from the domestic shorthair to the exotic Persian, rank among the most popular pets in American households.

Despite the popularity of cats there are many misconceptions about them. They are thought of as aloof, independent, and not affectionate. Nothing could be further from the truth, according to Victoria L. Voith, D.V.M., director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at the School of Veterinary Medicine, University of Pennsylvania. "Cats are affectionate, they greet their owners and follow them around. Some cats are so attached to their owners that they will delay parturition until the owner is present."

Some cats are affected by stress and suffer so severely that they will pull out large portions of their fur. To treat them, the behaviorist prescribes antidepressant or anti-anxiety drugs. Together with the owner, it is explored how the stressful situation can be identified and eliminated. If that is not possible, the cat is kept on drugs for a prolonged period to help it adjust.

Stress was thought to play a role in the occurrence of urinary blockage in cats. Dr. Voith and Debbie Ganster, research assistant, department of psychology, University of Pennsylvania, conducted a limited survey among fifty-three cat owners. The stress hypothesis was not confirmed, but they uncovered some rather interesting facts about the interaction of cat owners and their pets. Additional questionnaires have been distributed to obtain a broader, more definite sample.

In the preliminary study, the researchers found that 98 percent of the respondents considered the cat a family member, 36 percent thought of it as a child member, and 64 percent saw it as an animal member. They also found that 34 percent of the owners celebrated their cat's birthday, that 96 percent thought that they were aware of the cat's moods, and 92 percent thought that the cat was aware of their moods. All respondents talked to the cat, 51 percent as though it were a child, 49 percent as though it were a pet, and 25 percent at times talked to the cat as though it were an adult. A large percentage shared table and snack foods with the cat, and a number of owners attributed guarding instincts to their cats, describing them as "watch cats."

Cats are an important part of the daily lives of many people, they provide companionship not only to those living alone but also to families with children. The behavioral clinic helps these owners to correct problems which may threaten the human/

animal relationship. "It is a small investment when one considers that in most cases the problem can be solved and the cat be retained as a pet and family member," Dr. Voith explained.

Consultation for a cat problem usually takes from one hour to ninety minutes. The owner brings the cat to the clinic and Dr. Voith observes it and discusses the problem. Owners are advised of a course of treatment and training to follow at home. The clinic visit is followed up by phone calls from Dr. Voith until the problem is resolved. The cost for a one hour consultation is \$40 and cases are handled by reservation only. These can be made by calling 243-4525. Cats comprise about thirty percent of the cases seen at the Animal Behavior Clinic. Dr. Voith has been able to help most of them, restoring them to a loved, affectionate companion and family member.

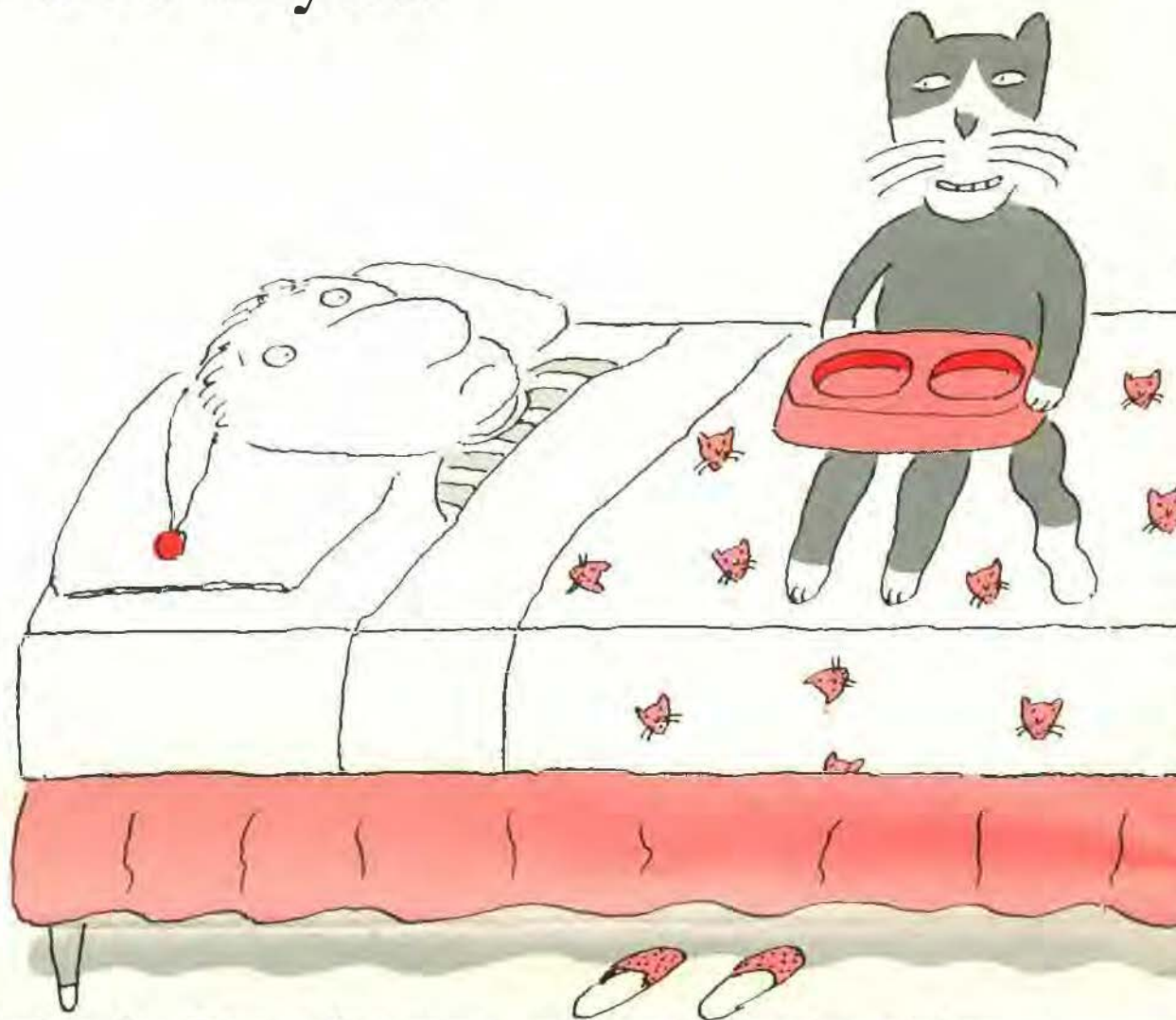
Dr. Voith has studied and written about animal behavior for many years, and her doctoral dissertation dealt with the maternal and sexual behavior of the female cat. She received her D.V.M. degree from Ohio State University and came to Penn in 1978 after completing studies in animal behavior and psychology at Ohio State University, and post-doctoral research in animal behavior at the University of California, Davis. She sees dogs, cats, and other pets at the clinic.

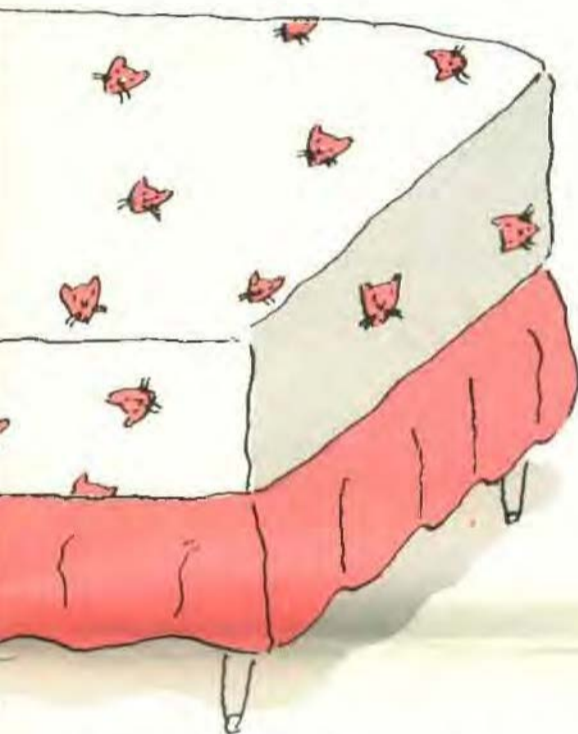
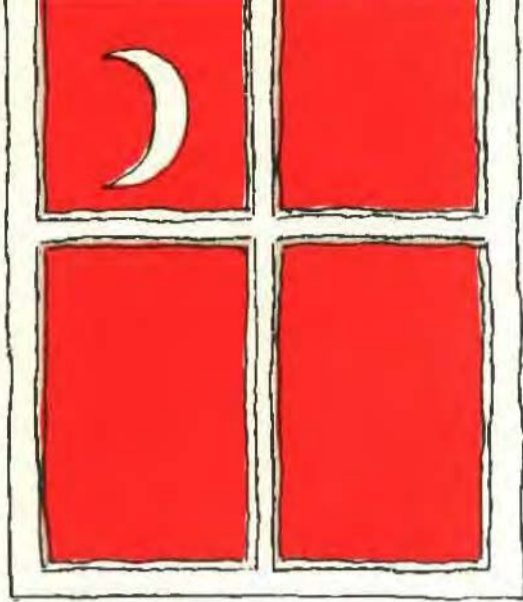
Another myth, that cats are antisocial with other cats, is also discounted by Dr. Voith. "Most cats are social in households, they enjoy the company of other cats, they

groom each other and eat and sleep together." Sometimes, though, there is a cat which may fight with another in the group. It is then that Dr. Voith is consulted. "Fighting can be the result of different things. A cat may have been frightened by the other cat and fights as a defense." In this case, the animal can be desensitized through a training and counter-conditioning process and the problem can usually be solved. Dr. Voith explained that a cat which fights as a result of territorial instincts is harder to treat, and that it is usually better to find a new home for it. "It is normal for some cats to want to be the only one [in the house]. They are more solitary and they make fine pets if they are the only cat in the household."

Cats are intelligent and, like dogs, they can be taught tricks. Dr. Voith told of one cat which was trained to jump over an object, shake hands, and roll over, all on command. The owner took a little time and had the patience to teach the cat by applying the standard method of positive reinforcement by using food rewards during each step of the training.

Standard training and reconditioning methods are also employed by Dr. Voith when solving a cat behavior problem. "Most problems are chronic, and the most common complaint is that the cat won't use the litter box. This behavior develops gradually as the cat shows a preference for a new location or a new substrate to scratch on." The undesirable behavior can be caused by a change in the litter product, though often the causes





are not known to the owner or the behaviorist. However, the problem can still be solved by identifying the factors that are maintaining the behavior. The owner is usually advised to cover the surface with plastic or foil and to move a litterbox nearby. When the cat finds its favorite scratching surface inaccessible, it will use the litterbox. Gradually the box is moved back to the desired location. Food and toys placed in the previous area further discourage its use as a litterbox.

Some clients consult the clinic because they believe their cat is aggressive toward people. This is frequently a case of misunderstanding between the feline and the human. "These cases usually turn out to be cats who play too roughly," Dr. Voith stated. "They may scratch or bite the owner who interprets the behavior as aggression." Dr. Voith explains to owners how to redirect the cat's play to objects such as moving toys which can be pounced upon.

Another frequently-heard complaint is that cats awaken their owners earlier and earlier each day. Dr. Voith explained that usually these owners, unwittingly, have conditioned the cats to expect food the moment the owner gets out of bed. "The first thing they do every morning is feed the cat. Treatment is simple. Ignore the cat when getting up, feed it later in the day and change the schedule. In a short time the cat will no longer associate getting up in the morning with being fed."

Animals Depend On People Too

Tom, a fennec fox at The Philadelphia Zoo, is a very lucky animal. Born at The Frankford Zoo in 1977, he was presented to The Philadelphia Zoo in 1978 by Frank Palumbo. Palumbo christened the African fox, Tom, in honor of Tom Fox, a columnist for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

This past March the University's Communications Department adopted the fennec fox. For only fifty dollars a year the department supplies him with his daily meals of canned dog food, a baby chick, a handful of meal worms or crickets, a hardboiled egg, and perhaps a slice of apple or banana. Tom has quite a large appetite for an animal who measures only sixteen to seventeen inches long and weighs just under three and a half pounds.

The Zoo began the ADOPT (Animals Depend On People Too) program in late 1978 to defray the enormous cost of feeding 1800 animals. Tom's meal might seem large for a small animal, but one tiger consumes as much as fourteen to sixteen pounds of horsemeat a day!

Ann Novak, the program's director, is pleased with ADOPT's progress. In fiscal year 1981, the Zoo netted approximately \$60,000 in donations. The 1982 tally reached almost \$100,000.

Supporters of ADOPT include a wide range of people: school classrooms, Todd Rundgren, SmithKline Corporation, and Mrs. George Bush. According to Mrs. Novak "parents" become very attached to their "zoo children." Animals often receive letters and holiday cards. One woman even composed a poem for her aardvark, consisting entirely of words beginning with the letter a.

The Communications Department has not attempted poetry yet. But they have a picture of Tom hanging on one of their walls and they visit him as much as possible.

Tom's home is the Small Mammal House. At one time he was on display in the rotunda of the building. Unfortunately, the rotunda area echoes greatly and Tom's six inch ears are extremely sensitive. Once when a number of school children were exploring the Small Mammal House, Tom became excited by the commotion and jumped out of his African habitat. Senior Keeper, George Konopka, finally caught him amid screaming children and teachers. Ever since this escapade Tom has been housed in a glass cage.

Soon a female fennec fox will join Tom in his house. If all goes well they will mate. Anyone interested in adopting the new fennec fox or any other animal should dial B-A-B-O-O-N-S and ask for Mrs. Novak.



Photograph courtesy of the Philadelphia Zoo