

Shelter Cats: The Behavioral Implications of Long Term Stay, and Methods of Alleviating Stress By Dilara G. Parry

A metal cage. The distant sound of dogs barking. The smell of fear in the air. A constant stream of strangers peering at you. Invasive procedures. No, it's not an alien abduction-it's the first day at a shelter for many a suddenly-homeless cat.

Though the stresses of the first days in a shelter are obvious, many of our cats' behavior improves as they settle into the shelter routine and become comfortable in their turf. But what if their stay extends over a long period of time? Even in the spacious facilities at Maddie's Pet Adoption Center at the San Francisco SPCA, a shelter is not a home: space is limited, the people, sounds and smells the cat encounters are different every day, and all that pressure can build.

As more shelters turn to a no-kill policy, the issue of long-term stay will likely be more relevant than ever. It thus is increasingly important to study the causes and consequences of long-term stay, and to come up with ways of alleviating the stresses inherent in such a stay.

Average Length of Stay

At the San Francisco SPCA, where I have worked for the past 6 years, a cats' average length of stay is 21 days. However, at any given time, five to ten percent of our cats have been in our facility for longer than 90 days, a stay we consider long-term. About two percent of our cats stay past the 120 day mark. And we have had cats stay as long as 240 days. When we analyze those cats who have been here longer than 90 days, we find that 8 out of 10 had presenting behavior problems. Other factors that contribute include serious medical concerns and/or old age.

When Are Behavior Problems Caused By Length of Stay?

It is important to note that, behaviorally speaking, the 90-day mark is somewhat arbitrary. Depending on the facilities and the individual temperament of the cat, behavioral problems due to shelter stay can surface as early as one or two weeks. Take for instance a highly active adolescent cat who is singly housed in a small cage because he is being treated for a contagious disease such as ringworm. It is likely that such a cat will start showing signs of kennel stress, possibly increased biting or play-aggression, within a period of two weeks. So while considering the ramifications of extended shelter stay, it is important to remain open-minded about the actual number of days, and take into consideration the many factors involved.

Age/Medical And Length of Stay

Generally speaking, age in and of itself is not as much of a challenge to adoption as concerns such as an ongoing medical problem like diabetes, or antisocial behavior. Take Colonel, for instance. He was an average looking blue tabby, and though in good health, he was fifteen years old. He got adopted within a few days of his arrival. Why? Because he solicited and enjoyed lots of attention, and greeted the public at the door of his room. Compare that with Patty, who was eleven, and white. Though she could be quite friendly, she did not allow much petting to her back, perhaps due to mild arthritis, and would often nip or swat. She was easy to love for those of us who knew her well: she was intelligent and playful, and could be quite affectionate in her own way. But for those members of the public who came by to choose a pet? She wasn't their first choice. Patty stayed with us for 142 days, waiting for that special person to take her on.

Behaviors That Accompany Long-Term Stays

Regardless of the causes of the stay, many of our long-term residents exhibit one or more of the following: lack of interest in environment, including the visiting public, lack of interest in play, increased aggression to people, weight gain or loss, and change in grooming habits, most often in the form of excessive grooming. Though we do not know whether cats can experience depression as humans do, it is interesting to note that these symptoms look very much like symptoms of depression in people. It is obvious, at least, from external signs that there is a level of frustration and stress experienced, as well as a withdrawal from formerly enjoyable activities.

Behaviors That Can Lead To Long-Term Stays

The behaviors that can lead to a long-term stay can be roughly divided into two categories: those cats who do not allow much petting, for reasons ranging from play-aggression to overstimulation or lowered tolerance for handling, and those cats who are very fearful and have a tendency to hide.

Shy/Fearful

The prognosis for fearful behavior in a shelter environment is good; shy cats tend to improve as they become comfortable in their surroundings and build trust with volunteers and staff. The optimal time for adoption comes once the cat has developed confidence, but is still engaged in the environment; this can be anywhere from 1 week to 60 days after arrival. After that time, shy cats too are susceptible to the stresses of long-term stay, including loss of interest in activities. The challenge with a scared or shy cat is to give her or him a "safe space" and yet still have the cat be visible to the public. At Maddie's Pet Adoption Center, we find that a variety of cat beds will serve this purpose. With shy cats who can easily be overlooked, we try to find colors that will help the cat stick out- these little details can help draw the adopters attention.

Overstimulation/Aggression

With cats that nip or swat with too much attention or handling, the prognosis is more guarded. These are often cats who are showing a low tolerance for stress, as irritable behavior can worsen under duress. Getting to know the triggers for the behavior and avoiding these triggers is paramount, as well as learning the individual "warning signals" of impending aggression. Interactive play sessions can be very helpful in reducing the stress levels; handling by inexperienced people should be avoided.

Individual Solutions for Individual Cats

We have a variety of options available to us for alleviating the stresses of long-term stay. The first course of action, really one that should be routinely employed as a preventive measure, is to enrich the environment of the shelter cat.

Shelter Enrichment

Cats love routine and structure, but they also need stimulation to their various senses. At the Maddie's Center, the items that we use include wheatgrass, treat-cubes (similar to the Buster cube for dogs- the cat needs to "work" to get the treats inside), catnip toys, and a myriad of safe cat toys such as Ping-Pong balls. A word about catnip: this should be an occasional treat, as cats can grow immune to the effect if it is left in with the cat. It may be safest in the shelter environment to monitor the cat for any aggression-some cats have shown increased aggression when stimulated by catnip. The effects of catnip don't last too long, however, making it a viable option under supervision. The possibilities for enriching the environment are limited only by the imagination - a low-cost item such as a cardboard box with tissue paper in it may provide fun for an hour or more for a bored cat. Moving a cat to a new location can be helpful if the cat is

beginning to show a lack of interest in its surroundings; too much shuffling should be avoided, however, as this can cause stress in and of itself.

Cat Companionship

Some cats benefit from the companionship of another, well-matched, cat. Such was the case with Elmo, a young, play aggressive cat who was with us over 5 months. For a couple of months, Elmo was under treatment for various conditions and could not be paired with other cats. With his level of frustration mounting, this energetic cat started to bite people more frequently. The daily play sessions we instituted, with interactive toys, were helpful- but they were not enough. Finally, the doctors gave us the go-ahead, and we matched him with a cat of a similar nature. His behavior improved almost overnight, as the two spent hours wrestling and chasing each other like kittens. This also helped to attract adopters' attention. Though Elmo's roommates got adopted ahead of him, we were able to keep Elmo mentally healthy until his time for adoption arrived.

A shy cat can benefit from having a buddy as well. The trick is to find a cat who is not equally shy, so the two don't reinforce each others' fearful behavior, but also not too domineering or pushy. Matchmaking can take time.

There are many cats at our facility for whom pairing would be very detrimental. Cats who are highly territorial or poorly socialized with other cats will be more stressed with a roommate than without. In fact, for more extreme cases, blocking all view of other cats has made for a happier cat- and one who shows her or his "best" self to the adoption public.

Human Companionship

By far the most important element of the formula for keeping cats mentally healthy in a shelter is the human one. Daily petting and playtime with interactive toys helps with the socialization of kittens and adults who have had limited human interaction, as well as giving them opportunity for much-needed exercise.

Many cats also thrive on bonds that are established with their caregivers; in a shelter, these cats have to establish new bonds with a often changing staff and volunteer force. If the shelter stay is very short, this may not be as crucial - but with long-term cats, this can literally be life-saving. Consider Lucky: an eight-year-old whose caregiver died, she appeared to be highly stressed when she arrived at our facility. She stopped eating, and was fractious. With the help of some wonderful volunteers, Lucky became more receptive to her new environment. She formed a bond with one volunteer especially - she would meow when she heard her special person coming, and enjoy lots of petting and playtime with her. When the volunteer could not visit for a few weeks, Lucky once again seemed despondent - she lost weight, and started grooming herself excessively. We put her on medication for the excessive grooming behavior, but it was when the volunteer came back regularly that Lucky started perking up. In fact, she got adopted on a day that her special volunteer was with her - no coincidence, in my mind: the cat "showed" better when she was in good spirits, as we all do!

Be it from staff or volunteers, added individual attention for those cats who stay in a shelter longer can benefit the cat greatly. We recently started a "case management" program for our volunteers who work with our more challenging cats. Volunteers take a special interest in one or more cats, agree to visit them a minimum of once weekly (in addition to the other volunteers who visit daily), and get involved in treatment options for behavior problems. This gives the cats a person to build a bond with, which is often the first step in being able to trust more people-especially with our formerly feral cats.

Other methods we employ infrequently are fostering and medication. Both should be used cautiously.

Fostering

Fostering into a home can be very helpful with such issues as anorexia due to stress or increased aggression in the shelter. For the SF/SPCA, the problem inherent in fostering is that the cat needs to return to the shelter in order to be adopted. Coming back into the shelter environment can be very stressful for some cats, so the value of fostering needs to be weighed against that potential stress. Again the issue comes back to individual temperaments: a cat who was extremely fearful when it first arrived would probably not be a good candidate for fostering except under dire circumstances. Cats that are aggressive, but confident and adaptable, may make better candidates. Another benefit of fostering in this case is to see how a cat will do in a home environment. If the behavior improves, this can be a valuable "selling point" with adopters.

Medication

With the assistance of our medical staff, we occasionally put cats on anti-anxiety medication for such behaviors as excessive grooming (once medical causes have been ruled out) and extreme aggression. The use of Prozac, for instance, helped with one cat who was non-responsive to traditional behavior modification. Since medication can take some time, and can be difficult to explain to adopters, we choose to use it only in those cases in which behavior modification is ineffective and the problem is severe.

Be Creative

Finally, be creative. Let the solution match the cat. Take Alpie, for instance. A six-year old tabby who, though confident and outgoing, had a short fuse when it came to accepting petting, Alpie grew more and more irritable and aloof the longer he stayed with us. Because he was very food-motivated, we used his kibble as training treats and harness-trained him to walk the shelter hallways with us. This rather un-catlike trick did the trick for Alpie; he grew to look forward to his "outings", and he also got some much-needed visibility from the public. The whole process improved his behavior; for many other cats it would have created, not eased, anxiety.

When coming up with solutions, we ask those who know the cats best-volunteers, staff, occasionally even previous caregivers. Sometimes a source close to the individual cat can give you ideas for enhancing the wellbeing of that particular cat, whether it be certain favorite toys, favorite ways of being petted, or particular food treats.

Adopting Out Long-Term Cats

The issues of working with long term cats and adopting them out go hand in hand; the main focus needs to be in finding a permanent home. For all the things we can do to make cats happy in a shelter environment, the shelter is not a home, and does not have the freedom and familiarity that a good home will provide. In essence, whatever the causes of long term stay, an extra effort needs to be made for that cat's adoption. One must accentuate the positive qualities of the cat, and educate the adopters as to the more negative qualities. In the case of a cat who seems to be overlooked by the public, one must come up with ways of separating the cat from the herd, so to speak. This can be as simple as changing his or her name to a catchy one, or as controversial as offering incentives to adoption.

The good news is that a great majority of our long term guests make a smooth transition into their new homes. While the adjustment, especially for shy cats, can take 2-3 months, some adopters see a full "recovery" from the shelter experience within 2 weeks. Many of the behavior problems

observed in the shelter fade into the backdrop as adopter and cat bond with each other over time, and in a home setting.

About The Author

Dilara Parry has been a Cat Behavior Counselor at The San Francisco SPCA for four years. Before devoting herself exclusively to the cats, Dilara worked as a certified Veterinary Technician in The SF/SPCA Clinic and at the Massachusetts SPCA .After working with animals all day, she goes home to six cats and two dogs.