

Kitty Comforts

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Nadine Gourkow would have to be a cat herself to become any more attuned to the needs of the feline species. As a graduate student in the University of British Columbia's animal welfare science program, she researched how simple changes in handling and housing can change the lives of cats in shelters. And as the animal welfare manager of the British Columbia SPCA, Gourkow created a video and accompanying manual, *The Emotional Life of Cats: A Guide for Improving the Psychological Well-Being of Cats*, to help teach staff in the organization's 38 shelters how to think from the kitty's perspective. A former dog trainer and groomer, Gourkow spoke with *Animal Sheltering* about strategies for helping shelter pooches as well.



The British Columbia SPCA's Nadine Gourkow has a knack for getting into the mind of the feline—something these local rescue center inhabitants obviously appreciated when Gourkow visited to evaluate their psychological health.

What got you interested in studying cat welfare in the shelter?

Initially I was going to do my research on dog adoptions, but every time I walked into the cat room I saw these cats in their cat litter with their dilated pupils and comments on the cage such as "nasty cat"—or, for those cats that turn their whole cage upside down at night, "messy cat." And I thought, I have to find out what's going on here. And I did a literature review and found that there was some research done, but certainly nowhere near enough, and there wasn't really any research that was proposing solutions.

Why do you think there really hasn't been very much research—not nearly as much on cats as dogs?

Well, I think that because of the social status that dogs have in society, there's probably more money to do research on dogs than on cats. ... Dogs are more valued—let's just be honest about it. Dogs have all sorts of jobs and they have all sorts of things that give them a better place in society. That's why I'm so focused on trying to promote the health benefits of owning a cat—because when people realize that cats reduce depression and hypertension and all of these things, I think that's going to raise their value in society.

You talked about the Five Freedoms in your thesis and are also planning to discuss them in your workshop at the next Animal Care Expo. Can you tell me how you have applied the concepts to your philosophy of animal care in the shelter?

There was a big outcry in 1964 after an exposé on factory farming was done in Ruth Harrison's book, *Animal Machines*. And from that came sort of an embryonic stage, if you want, of the Five Freedoms, but basically it was that animals should have the freedom to stand up, turn around, lie down, groom themselves, and stretch their limbs. In 1992, the Farm Animal Welfare Council sort of took that recommendation report and came out with the Five Freedoms.

We're not the only humane organization that has adopted that for companion animals. But where we've done it differently is instead of saying "freedom to express normal behaviors"—which is one of the Five Freedoms and which we thought would get into some problems because people would say, "Well, you know, breeding and running around on the streets is a natural behavior"—we changed it to "freedom to express behaviors that promote well-being." Of course, we define what "well-being" is.

So that's in your organizational charter?

Yes, and the reason we decided to actually put that in our charter, and the reason it's really a handy standard to have, is because it serves two purposes: First of all, it guides how you're going to assess animals, how you determine whether they have good welfare or not. Scientists have determined that when an animal is comfortable, when it doesn't have emotional distress or pain or injury and it isn't hungry and thirsty—and when it can express behavior natural to its species—it has good welfare.

It's so easy to take that concept and adapt it to any animal you're dealing with. ... For example, cats' natural behavior is to hide when they're scared. Well, if you have animals in your shelter that are scared and you're not providing hiding

spaces, then you know you need to do something about that. So I have a program called the Welfare Enhancement System for Cats, which has a protocol manual for everything from intake to adoption and so on. And one of the protocols in there is called "Conducting the Five Freedoms Test." So what the staff are trained to do—as they walk through the shelter and interact with animals and everything—is to continuously scan the environment and ask themselves questions relating to the Five Freedoms: Is there anything in this environment that causes stress? And [if so], what can I do to change it?

What's a good example of that?

The protocol for placing cats is a good example. ... At intake, staff used to put the cats on the counter and they'd do all the paperwork. Now if somebody's doing the Five Freedoms test, it's very easy for them to say, "Oops, you know what? I'm going to cover this cat and put him higher up against the wall." And they haven't even had to make any big changes, but because they understand they have to promote natural behavior, they can reduce emotional distress.



That's why we're evidence-based—because it requires that the practices that you adopt in the shelter are based on scientific knowledge about animals, not just opinion. It's not that opinions and experience are not valued, but they need to be combined with a sound knowledge of animal behavior and also to be based on practices that have been tested. So basically at the research level, you don't just put a cat high up and cover it. You actually measure whether that reduces the stress. And once you've determined that, then it becomes a good, evidence-based practice.

The BC SPCA's Hide & Perch Box allows cats to protect themselves from perceived danger by hiding or leaping onto higher ground.

The Five Freedoms to me are just so beautiful to have in terms of explaining to people what animals need, in terms of training our staff, in terms of developing assessment tools that will measure not only poor welfare but good welfare. Very often in shelters we measure if the cats are not eating . . . but we forget that not being depressed or not being hurt doesn't mean that you're happy. For an animal to be happy, it's just like a human being: you have to be able to engage in these types of behaviors that are happy behaviors—playing and exploring. So when we do our assessments we look not only for absence of poor welfare but also for presence of good welfare.

So many shelters in the U.S.—and I imagine Canada—have such limited funding that they often think that enrichment programs are out of their price range. I think you say in your video how people on a shoestring budget can still make life better for cats, but what are some of the main things that they could do right away?

Well, once again, I think that's where the Five Freedoms are useful because you're forced to think from the animal's perspective. So although sticking a paper bag in a cat's kennel or letting a cat turn all his stuff upside down so that he can hide during the day is probably not the most aesthetically pleasing thing, if we think from the animal's perspective it makes a huge difference in the welfare of the animal. And we can always explain that to the public.

There's no set recipe of "Here's what you can do" ... The real recipe, the real thing is to get people to begin thinking, *What would my cat do if he were scared? What would he eat? What if I were babysitting a friend's dog and he was missing his owner or he was in a strange place? What would he need?* And if you're able to get the staff to understand from the animal's perspective, then they can just be really free to be creative; we have some people here who are doing really creative things that I wouldn't have even thought about.

Like what?

Well, for example, we have a lady who creates tiny little cardboard boxes, and she puts little snacks in there, and she puts them in the dog cage. And it's amazing because these dogs will tear it apart. And although it only takes 15 minutes for them to do that, they just seem to be calmer for the rest of the day.

We know that dogs like to explore, they like to dig, they like to do little things like that. Take a handful of bacon bits and throw it all over the cage, and there you have it—you have a dog who's going to spend the next 45 minutes exploring, searching for little bits of food and things like that.

You can take a rope that you tie on one side of the kennel to the other and attach soda pop bottles that have a little hole and some food—and are just high enough that the dog needs to sort of get up on his hind legs and knock it with his nose to have the food come down. These dogs have no control over anything, and that

provides them with a way of having some control over obtaining something. They do an action, and something good happens.

You can take a yogurt container, make a hole in it with a little treat, put it in the cat's enclosure—the cat has to put his paw in there and try and get the treat out.

One of the recent discoveries with horses—once again, horses that are so social—is that placing a mirror in the stall of a horse will completely reduce the head-shaking and bar-biting. And it's such a simple thing, but how would you ever come up with that unless you really understand horses and their needs?

I think your video, *The Emotional Life of Cats*, is so great because it inspires that empathetic viewpoint—I love how you show a guy suddenly waking up in a room that's not his own, surrounded by sounds and sights that completely disorient him. It really makes you realize how terrified cats must be when they enter the shelter. What always helps in workshops when I talk about anxiety is to say to people, "Imagine yourself at night, that you're kind of slowly falling asleep, and then all of a sudden you hear this noise that spooks you, and you can't quite identify it." Many people have been in that situation—and if you pay attention to your body at that time, you'll notice that you have an increased heart rate. You'll also notice that all of a sudden it's like your hearing is Superman hearing, and you can see every shadow, and you're sort of paralyzed there, and you're waiting for the next sound to happen so that you can identify what's going on.

Well, that's the state our cats are in. Anxiety is a state of uncertainty—basically it's not knowing what's going to happen. Your body prepares itself for an emergency, so you've got all this cortisol; glucose is going through your body to prepare your muscles for an escape if you need to. Your pupils are dilated, you're more vigilant. Our cats are like that for three or four days because they can't figure out what's going on.

So with those cats, once again, I say to the staff, "Most of these cats are pets, so we know that there's at least one thing that they know—humans. Even though you're a stranger to that cat, you're still a human, and hopefully he's had good relationships with humans in the past. So what do you think you could do? Put yourself in the place of the cat. What would calm you down when you're in your bed trying to identify this noise?" Well, what would relax you is to finally be able to identify that it's something safe, or it's the dog that knocked down the lamp, for example.

Right. What can staff do from there?

I try and get them to think about how they can get this cat to change his perception of what's going on and to be able to say to himself, "Oh, I've been talked to like that before, and I've been petted in that way before, and it's probably okay." And when they do that it is amazing because they start talking to these cats in the way that they would talk to their own cats, as opposed to rushing around cleaning because it's got to be done at 12. And sometimes I have seen cats that were in such big states turn around in two minutes because somebody took the time to actually stop what they were doing and to say, "Kitty, it's okay"—and to let the cat smell their hand and to pet him in a way that's familiar to the cat. It doesn't work with all cats; some cats need to figure it out for themselves, and they need to just hide.

You've written that consistency in who cleans and feeds can alleviate anxiety. Have you tried to actually change staff schedules?

Yes, as a result of the study. We used to have a three-day rotation, and now the shelter has selected staff who actually enjoy working with cats, and we have regular staff now. So we have one person doing the cats during the week and one on the weekend, and it's always the same people. And then the volunteers do stuff over and above the cleaning. So minimizing rotation is just an absolute here, and I'm sure that makes a difference.

You wrote about how cats in the wild seek holes in trees and other hiding places—and then compared that to cats in the shelter who shred newspaper and turn over items to try to create a safe space. But, as you wrote in your thesis, that space is routinely destroyed as part of daily cleaning procedures. That's so sad, but then you can see why shelters need to do it.

Yes, and I understand, and it's easy to solve—you just give a hiding area instead, and the cat doesn't need to do that.

And then you spot-clean around it? How do you balance stress reduction with the need for disinfection?

It was very controversial when I proposed that we stop disinfecting [each cage daily]—because disinfecting is of course promoted in the shelters as a way of managing disease. I work very closely with our chief vet, and we discussed it at

length. I said, "You know, this is a big risk that we're taking." But my take on it is that stress is such an important factor in the onset of disease that if we reduce stress by stopping daily disinfection—and disinfecting is a source of stress because you remove the scent and you have to remove the cats from the cages and so on—I suspect that we're actually going to have less disease.

And he was willing to take a chance on that, but he wasn't convinced. But we ran a pilot first where instead of disinfecting, we left the cat in the cage and would just clean with all the water around the cats and so on. For the cats that were really stressed we have a sort of triangular thing that goes over the openings of the box, so the cat is actually not seeing what's going on; he is enclosed in the box while we just sort of spot-clean around it.

And the other thing that was changed is not taking the towel away. Staff had been disinfecting the towels every day, but instead we implemented a rotation of towels so the cat always has two, and there's one that's always saturated with the cat's smell. And what we found is that the disease rate actually went down when we weren't disinfecting daily. I was very lucky—our test could have gone the other way. It was a small pilot at first, so it wasn't that big a risk. But it worked, so now we don't disinfect in our shelters until the cats leave, but then at that point we take the door off and we do a complete disinfection of the cage before the next cat comes in

Would this work in other facilities?

I can't recommend this for other shelters because I don't want that responsibility. But maybe somebody would be interested in making a trial and disinfecting half their cats' kennels and not the others. You can't do that if you're not reducing stress, though. You can't leave your cats in a barren environment and then over and above that not disinfect and expose them to pathogens.

I came about this idea from what was going on in zoos. When you look at zoo research, you see the same thing—they used to disinfect all the exhibits, and then the poor animals would spend the next four hours re-marking the whole territory. Very distressing for them. That would be like somebody coming and changing the color of your paint and moving all your paintings in your house every day. ...

The other factor is that we know at least 24 percent of cats are carriers—even if they're not exposed to pathogens themselves, they're carriers. And even if you took that cat and you placed him in a bubble where there's no pathogens or anything, but you let him be stressed, that will onset upper respiratory. So stress is a huge factor.

You've said that communal housing isn't good for all cats and that the spaces must be designed appropriately. What are some of the things you would require in order to set up colony housing?

I purposely designed one communal where cats had very low interactions with other cats. They had their own personal space, and there were shelves where they couldn't be approached from behind. And then the other one was what we often see in communals—which is these big enrichment trees in the middle where all the hiding areas are on the tree and then there's these nice long shelves in front of the windows. And it wasn't statistically significant—there wasn't enough of a difference to make a difference in my stats—but it certainly made a difference when I was observing my cats.

There was a lot more aggression in the cage where cats had these sort of beautiful communal trees with carpeted walkways and all sorts of things. It was really nice for people—I had toys in there and all sorts of things which I didn't have in the other—but when it came right down to it, cats didn't really have personal space. There was always a risk of being approached from the other side when they were doing something on that tree or walking on one of the carpets—you had to cross a path. And as we know from the way cats behave on the outside, crossing paths is something very significant. Cats don't like to do that.

I think once again, when we're creating communal space, we need to look at things from the cat's perspective. He doesn't know these other cats, and cats take a long time to develop friendships if they are going to. They tolerate each other fairly well, but not enough that they're willing to share a shelf or bedding or those types of things.

You wrote that most shelter workers receive training in handling of dangerous animals, but few receive training in strategies to minimize stress. Why do you think that is?

Well, because the model used in shelters has been the medical model for a very long time. The focus has been on providing food, water, shelter, medical care, and preventing disease. And although certainly the medical profession is very aware of

the role of stress in disease, I think it's underrated. It's been underrated until behaviorists and animal welfare scientists began to look at how huge the impact is.

And of course then there's the legal aspect, which dictates that you have to give your staff training for dangerous animals. The other training that we give them is how to disinfect, how to give shots, and how to do all these things—because that's the medical approach to animal care. The animal welfare science approach to animal care—combined with the medical, of course, because we need to continue doing that—is sort of a newer approach, and hopefully it'll spread around a bit more.

As far as cost-savings, you also said somewhere that enrichment programs will end up saving money for the shelter in the long run, right? Well, it saves money in several ways. For shelters who actually take care of sick animals, you'll have less sickness in your shelter. You also have a shorter length of stay before adoption. And even though people say they come to a shelter because they want to save an animal from death, they don't actually pick the ones that look like they need to be rescued. They pick the ones that are happy and social. When you consider that it takes about 12.5 days to adapt to the shelter and begin to show those kinds of behaviors when you don't have enrichment—compared to the average 4.5 days when you do have enrichment—cats [in enrichment programs] have a better chance of getting adopted.

For sure, there are some costs associated with improving welfare—let's not lie about it. But I think it balances out with the cost-saving because of lower disease and higher adoption rates and so on. But certainly if you want to do a good job of it, the first cost involved in improving welfare is staff training. You can improve welfare with almost no items if you have staff who really understand each animal and how to interact with that animal to reduce anxiety, as compared to buying all sorts of fancy things that staff don't really know how to use.

Have you had a better response from the public and more adoptions where you've done this?

I can tell you anecdotally what we've been told since we've [implemented our] Hide & Perch box and the training that cats are sick less often, that the adoptions have gone up, that people spend more time interacting with the cats. The adoption counselors tell us: "Well, people are just sort of standing around and talking about what the cats are doing or talking more about their personality rather than what they look like."

*Nadine Gourkow was a speaker at The HSUS's Animal Care Expo, April 6–9, 2005, in Atlanta, Georgia. For more details on the next Animal Care Expo, visit [www.AnimalSheltering.org/expo](http://www.AnimalSheltering.org/expo).*



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