

Excerpt from "The 'Safe' Dilemma" by behaviorist Peter Neville

A four point plan for the indoor cat

The following four point plan can help to keep an indoor cat psychologically healthy.

1. Play the right games

The first key for exercising the mind and body to promote best mental and physical health in indoor cats of all ages is lots of action that allows your cat to express its innately rewarding predatory sequence of behaviour: 'eye-stalk-chase-pounce-bite', so as to make up for the lack of opportunity to practise on real prey in the process of acquiring food. Instigate hunting type chase games with a range of moving toys that you activate up to 30 times per day for solitary indoor cats. This is because cats are designed to need to catch about 10 mice per day for survival but would perhaps, even with a very generous estimate, only catch a mouse one time in three approaches (initiations of the hunting sequence), so dangling a fishing rod type toy and rolling balls of paper past your cat's line of vision and then up and over furniture to chase and pounce on, needs to be offered frequently. It doesn't take long, it's great fun to see a cat co-ordinate all those marvellous senses and little muscular movements and it really makes the difference between a cat that is happy indoors and one that is just plain neglected and bored.

2. Social contact

This is the easy part! Always respond to your indoor cat if he comes to you in search of a cuddle or a cosy chat and make time in your busy schedule, especially when you return home after some hours away, to say hello for at least a few moments and re-establish that bond. Indoor cats tend to coincide their activity and waking patterns around the presence of their owners and rest and sleep when they are alone, so it is very important to 'be there' when they need you. But don't wake him or chase him around trying to be nice to him – you will probably have less contact with him if you do and he may see you as a disturbance and even a threat and avoid you. Let him dictate the relationship and always respond, but don't rely on affection as your only form of contact, however much you both enjoy it. Play hunting is probably more important to a normally solitary predator, but equal measures of both are required. Of course, indoor cats should never be kept singly if at all possible so that they have this vital social contact even when you are away. Some cats may be very territorial and anti-social and prefer to live alone, but if they can be kept in pairs or more, they will not only hopefully enjoy being affectionate with each other, but also practise their hunting behaviours in gentle form on each other. This means that the number of chase games that you should instigate with each individual cat could perhaps be reduced to a couple of sessions of about five chase and pounce games each.

3. Territory size versus novelty

When it comes to territory, the amount of space available to a cat isn't the main factor. One study suggested that an indoor cat should have at least two rooms to move around in and not be able to see all parts of his patch from all points, but this is rather meaningless. Although many people build an outdoor run for their cats, many cats soon get bored with that area in the same way as they get bored with the house once they have got to know all about it and all the people and animals in it. Free ranging cats, of course, encounter a changing environment every time they go out, and so to compensate for that lack of stimulation indoors, you must try to provide as changing an environment as possible in your home. Bring in lots of new objects with different smells attached for your cat to investigate every day. Make sure your cat's vaccinations are fully up to date, and then bring him tree branches, rocks, cardboard boxes and tubes, newspapers folded into run through arches, natural platforms, cat furniture etc, as well as a steady flow of new toys. Everything will be new and demand an inspection, and help to ensure that he continues to use his senses to the full.

4. Introduce frustration: make feeding more difficult

Abandon thoughts of providing food in bowls as this cuts down a cat's natural active foraging time to just a few minutes per day compared with the hours that he would need to spend hunting to feed himself. Instead, provide complete dry food in foraging toys that he must manipulate for the food to fall out – these are available in all good pet stores. Divide the daily recommended ration into as many refills as possible and hide the toys in different places every time, including in and around the new objects that you bring him for exploration. Divide the rest of his daily ration into lots of portions that you hide elsewhere around the home for him to seek out and discover before he eats.

There are many good reasons why you might choose to keep your cat indoors from the start, but with good daily attention to his diet, healthcare and his physical and psychological wellbeing, he will enjoy a long and healthy life. The opportunity to investigate novelty, forage, practise hunting behaviours and enjoy direct social contact and affection with you, and hopefully other cats too, is vital to keeping him happy and compensated for the lack of natural change, challenge and self organisation that goes with free access to the outdoors. As ever, the more effort you make to understand reach with cats, the more rewarding they are, indoors or out!

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