

Cats on the Couch: Soothe Kitty's Anxious Nerves

Learn about muscle memory and how it reacts to pleasant and unpleasant situations.

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Macenzie is usually a laid-back cat, but thunder and lightening storms terrify him and sudden movements and noises startle him. His owner, Sonya, met with me to find out how to desensitize his fear. Sonya felt it was important to deal with this while he was young so it wouldn't be a source of greater discomfort for Macenzie in his later years.

Cats have exquisite muscle memory. Muscle memory is when a cat or person goes through a particular feeling or experience and that feeling stays in the body; the muscle remembers. This enables them to react to any situation. If the memory is unpleasant, they withdraw or flee. If it is pleasant they respond happily. Macenzie may have been alone or sick during a thunderstorm, and now associates fear with storms causing muscle reactions.

I outlined a program to treat Macenzie's fears. First, I recommended Sonya talk as she performed tasks that might startle Macenzie so he wouldn't be taken by surprise. This could reduce the impact of her sudden movements and noises, making him feel more in control of the situation and his fears.

To help him relax, I suggested Sonya purchase a small table fountain because the sound of running water is very calming. Aromatherapy, such as vanilla or lavender potpourri, candles or oils, also can be a source of relaxation. Sonya placed lavender potpourri in the bathroom, a vanilla candle in the living room and some lavender oil in one lamp.

To reduce Macenzie's fear of storms, I recommended Sonya either purchase or record a tape of calming music that includes the sound of rain. This tape along with Sonya talking in a soft soothing voice while petting Macenzie and indulging him and his companion cat, Foxy, in some playtime should go a long way toward helping Macenzie overcome his fears.

"I have a feeling Foxy and I are going to benefit from Macenzie's program," Sonya says.