

Peace in the Multicat Home

Holistic strategies can promote harmonious behavior.

By Lisa A. Hanks

“Serena, a beautiful tabby cat, was literally licking so much that she had innumerable hairless holes throughout her coat,” recalls Kris Lecakes-Haley of Phoenix, a certified Bach flower practitioner and Reiki master who uses holistic methods to aid animals with emotional and behavioral problems.

The cat appeared to be frightened of a new kitten. Haley decided to use Bach flower essences: Mimulus for her likely fear of the kitten, walnut for the change in her environment, white chestnut for the repetitiveness of her behavior and crab apple for her obsession to be clean.

Within a week, Serena had stopped licking, her hair was growing back and she allowed the kitten to come closer to her than ever before.

Like Serena’s owner, people sometimes mistakenly assume cats will automatically get along. On the contrary, cats are typically territorial and likely to react negatively the moment they see another cat enter their turf.

Turf invasion is met with behaviors like fighting; missing the litterbox; ambushing or bullying one cat; spraying, particularly with male cats; and unhealthy emotions, such as stress, jealousy, rage and fear.

With a proper introduction and plenty of kitty resources, a new cat is more likely to fit in. “Key issues typically revolve around two things: Incorrect or rushed introductions, which frequently cause tremendous resentment, and not enough litterboxes,” Haley says.

It usually goes deeper than that, though. “Fighting and territoriality have their roots in deeper core issues,” Haley says. “We seek to get to what’s fundamentally motivating the behavior to best treat it.”

Holistic Aids to Halcyon Homes

“All animals, from giraffes to goldfish, are sensitive to change in their environment,” Haley says. Cats in particular are extremely sensitive to changes, such as the addition or loss of a cat or person.

In addition to addressing the core problems, customized holistic treatments can relieve stress, rebalance emotions and make your cat more open to change. “Cats are sensitive, empathic animals that respond well to energy-based treatments, from Reiki to acupuncture to flower essences to homeopathy,” says Anna Maria Gardner of Brinnon, Wash., a holistic veterinarian who has practiced for more than 15 years.

“Aside from balancing emotions and physical conditions, acupuncture releases endorphins — a calming and relaxing effect that helps in multicat situations,” Gardner says.

Homeopathy, which employs highly diluted remedies, is prescribed based on a cat’s entire health picture, or occasionally, on specific symptoms. “Aconite is sometimes helpful for fear, and works well on feral cats and in multicat homes,” Gardner says.

Flower essences, spring water infused with flowers, can release negative emotions such as lack of confidence or obsessive compulsiveness. Some flower essences contain alcohol as a preservative and, therefore, should be applied topically or in the ear rather than given orally. For remedies that do not contain alcohol, you can apply a few drops to the water or food.

“Bach’s Rescue Remedy is good to have handy for acute stress. A good start for fighting is holly, with chicory for territoriality,” Haley says. While pursuing this type of alternative treatment for behavior modification, it’s important to take your cat to the veterinarian to rule out any underlying health problems.

Do not use essential oils, because they are toxic and can be lethal to cats. Natural alternatives are hydrosols, which are water-based, less-concentrated herbal distillations. “I like Roman chamomile and lavender for calming, but prefer them in a diffuser or spray rather than directly on the animal,” Gardner says. “Commercial sprays containing herbal combinations

can work, too, but be sure they're safe for cats." Chamomile has been linked to bleeding problems in cats. Passionflower can cause dizziness, confusion, loss of limb coordination, nausea and vomiting. It's better just to spritz the room than to spray directly on the cat or use internally.

Changes to Your Castle

One easy fix is to alter your home environment to encourage harmony. "Minimize stress and create more cat space by adding plenty of cat toys, houses, trees, scratching posts, boxes, beds, cat accessories, cat-door access to a fenced outdoor area, and above all, litterboxes," Gardner advises. "I've had clients with 30-plus cats all get along when they used strategies like this."

First, provide one litterbox for each cat plus one, in quiet areas around the house. Nothing causes a cat to flee a litterbox faster than a noisy washer, territorial fellow cat or nosy dog.

Second, offer multiple scratching opportunities with tall scratching posts and horizontal scratchers in varied textures. And be sure to put out separate food and water bowls.

Spend at least 10 to 15 minutes twice a day playing with your cats. Create more fascinating play opportunities with unique toys, tunnels, sacks, obstacle courses and treat-dispensing toys. Set up stimulating places for your cats to perch, sleep and hang out so they're not all vying for the same cat tree.

One-on-one time with each cat — petting, playing and grooming — is vital to multicat harmony.

These harmonic strategies and lots of patience are typically rewarded. "I've had some particularly aggressive cats respond well to homeopathy and stop attacking other cats in the household, which changed the whole dynamic and made things a lot less stressful for everyone — feline and human," Gardner adds.

Lisa Hanks is a freelance writer based in Newport Beach, Calif. As she writes each day, her three cats rotate lap duties to be sure she is never catless.