

ANNELEEN BRU

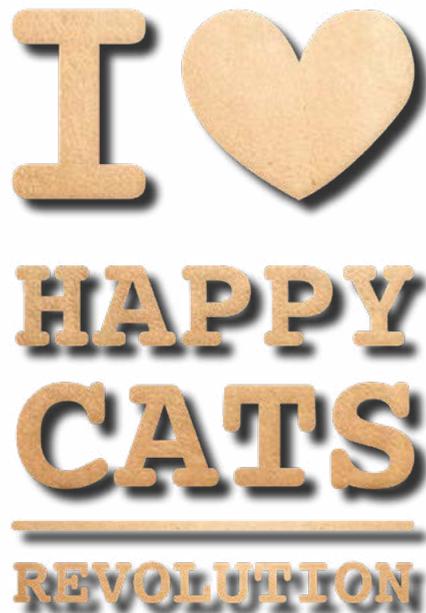
I ♥

HAPPY  
CATS

REVOLUTION

HOW TO CREATE  
AN AMAZING RELATIONSHIP  
WITH YOUR CAT

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING,  
MANAGING AND MODIFYING CAT BEHAVIOUR



HOW TO CREATE  
AN AMAZING RELATIONSHIP  
WITH YOUR CAT

ANNELEEN BRU

CAT  
MATRIX<sup>®</sup>



PART 2:

STRENGTHEN THE  
RELATIONSHIP



## Goal: Optimising the behaviour of the cat owner

In the second part of a behaviour modification plan, I give owners the following 'house rules' with the idea of getting them to change their own behaviour so that they no longer constitute an unpredictable stress factor in their cat's environment.

Owners often continue to treat their cats the way they have been doing for years, without giving it much thought or questioning it. Presenting owners with a set of house rule can be an uncomfortable experience at times because owners aren't always keen on examining their own behaviour. They like the way they treat their cat, get pleasure out of it and will regularly go against my advice.

Many of my rules seem to go against the grain because owners feel that they might weaken their relationship with their cat which is mainly due to the fact that I advocate reducing contact with their cat. But here's the fun bit: you get the opposite effect!

The purpose of these 'house rules' is to make you, as owner, predictable, lovely and safe in your cat's eyes so that she pays more attention to you, seeks more contact, is less stressed by contact and so that you have less of an impact on your cat's 'threshold of arousal'.

In addition, sticking to my 5 golden rules' (STEPS 16-20) will actively influence your cat's mood and state of mind, making her more resilient to stress within her environment.

It's simple: even if you only stick to the following rules half the time, you will notice a remarkable difference in your cat's stress levels, an improvement in the bond with your cat and a change in your relationship that's for the better. Mind you, I genuinely hope you'll manage to stick to these rules three quarters of the time! And before you start fretting, of course you can still give your cat an occasional hug, provided you keep it short!

1

## CATS ARE NOT HUMANS

Avoid humanising cats.  
Everything a cat does, she does for a good reason.  
Accept her natural needs, behaviour and instincts.

My first suggestion is to stop engaging in anthropomorphism, which means treating your pet as if she had human qualities and emotions. She doesn't!

There are situations where I wouldn't mind cats being elevated to a slightly more human level, but more often than not, owners treat their cats like humans, which they shouldn't. When it comes to e.g. cleaning

litter trays, providing quiet individual eating places and rest areas, giving your cat everything she instinctively needs, we of course need to be prepared to treat our cat as a 'human' being.

But when we're talking about showing affection, hugging, approaching, making contact, understanding and appreciating your cat's instincts such as scratching, spraying and nocturnal routines, the lie of the land changes. Not only the way we treat our cat has to change, also our own expectations need to be adjusted.

After all, people have different needs than cats. As a group animal, for example, we crave physical contact. People who have been on their own for a long time can really suffer from the lack of physical contact with other people (or animals).

This need for skin contact, despite the apparent similarity, does not correspond to head bumping in cats, which has a different purpose altogether, i.e. communicating.

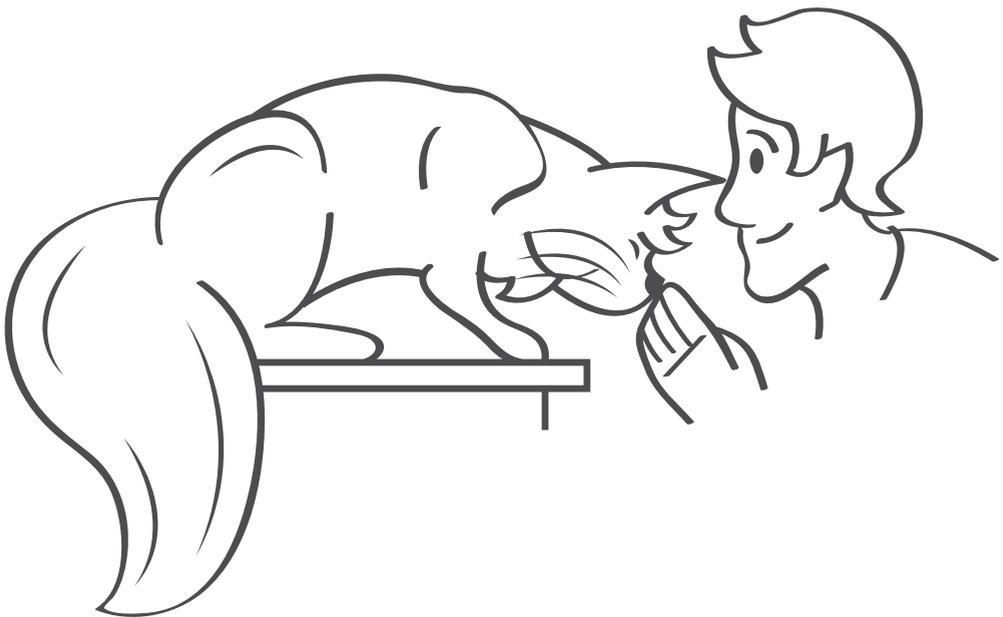
We often attribute human emotions to our cats like anger, jealousy and disappointment or personality traits like domineering.

In a revolution of happy cats, we aim to change the way we look at our cats. We want people to look at cats in a modest and deeply grateful way, grateful for their amazing individuality as an animal species, for

our opportunity to have this prehistorically programmed mini-tiger in our homes without them eating us. Amazing isn't the word!

Instead of wanting to change everything about our cat, we now meet all her needs and expectations, out of gratitude and with profound respect, with knowledge and not just for reasons like 'I bought this because it was on special offer' or 'I heard from someone that...'.

Your new mission is to inasmuch as possible respect cats for who they are and to feel good about that.



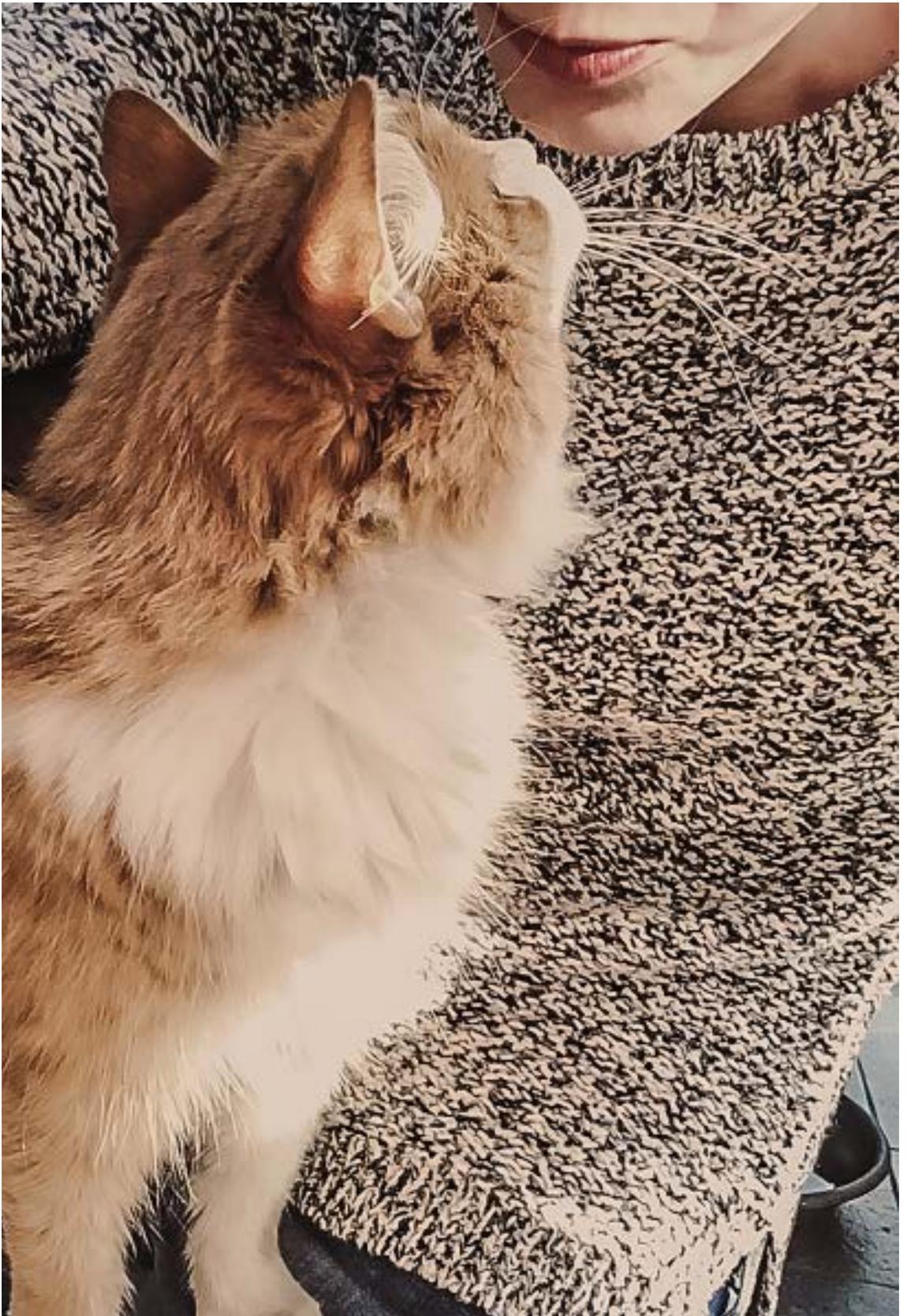


Photo Credit: Katrien Muyldermans  
Feline Model: Rosie

2



### OWNER = SAFE

Be that safe haven where your cat always feels safe, even when you need to do something she doesn't like.

As owners we are a regular source of stress for cats. When observing stress or undesirable behaviour, it is extremely important that we, as owners, completely and inasmuch as possible eliminate ourselves as a stress factor.

We do this by ensuring that we are consciously (and later unconsciously) aware of how our behaviour may impact on our cat's behaviour.

In the following step-by-step plan I give you an overview of the essential steps you, as owner, should or should not take to eliminate yourself as a stress factor for your cat. You may feel resistance to some steps, that is okay.

Just go through the steps, take a deep breath and ask yourself what might be the cat-friendly alternatives you could use for the need you are feeling at the moment. For example, do you feel like cuddling your cat? Then lie on the floor to establish contact with your cat instead of picking her up like baby. Remember that most stress-reduction is often about the small moments.

#### Practical Step-by-step plan - How to be a safe owner

- Step 1:** When our cat makes contact with us, we drop whatever we are doing and check what she needs yet often all she is looking for is a hand to rub against, a short stroke or a sweet word.
- Step 2:** If your cat takes the initiative to make contact, make sure to always keep that contact pleasant. At these (tempting) moments, avoid cleaning her eyes or ears, removing knots from her fur, etc. Leave this for a training moment, one your cat voluntarily participates in.
- Step 3:** Always keep your distance from your cat when doing something around the house she would find unpleasant such as vacuuming, drying you hair or walking down the hallway at a steady pace (shod). Go in the opposite direction and make sure that your cat never feels cornered by the 'danger' coming her way. If this is unavoidable, make sure that she can climb in or on top of

something; it will make it less scary for your cat.

**Step 4:** Inasmuch as possible, keep your cat with her 4 paws on the ground. Lifting her as a means to make contact with your cat gives her a very unnatural and unsafe feeling, because if that happens in the wild, it's game over! Get into the habit of sitting or lying down on the floor if you want to make contact.

**Step 5:** NEVER hold your cat like a baby. Laying your cat on her back literally takes away all predictability, safety and control. There's no reason to do this. Even if you feel like your cat likes this, stop it.

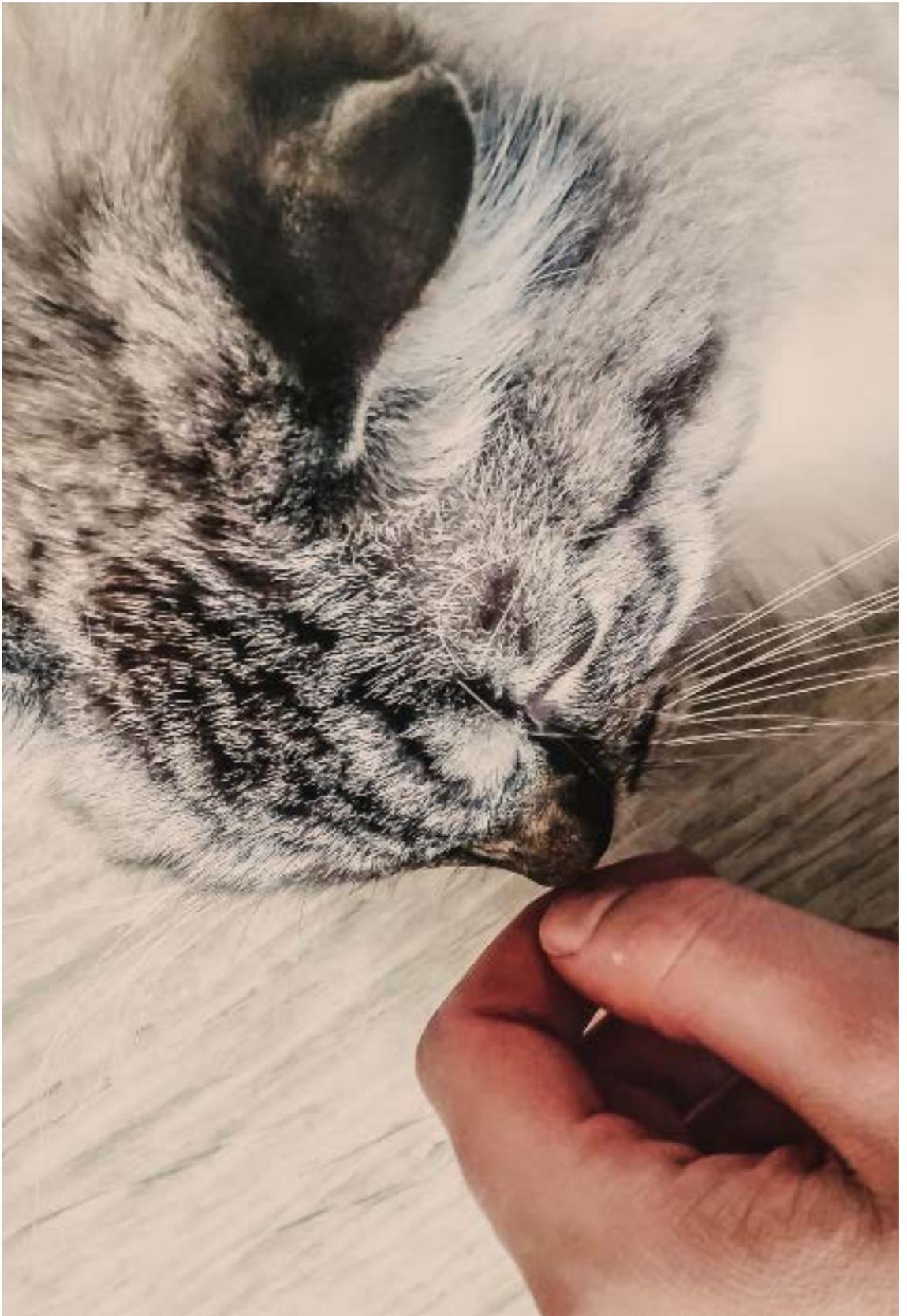
**Step 6:** If you have to pick up your cat, always put her bottom well supported on the inside of your arm, and her paws against your chest. At all times give her the opportunity to jump on a nearby height when you feel that she wants to or put her down in a controlled manner and avoid her jumping down.

**Step 7:** Please, don't dress your cat. Cats have a very sensitive coat; they need their fur to get information from their environment and having her fur covered will send her stress levels soaring. She'll end up walking with her belly close the ground and may even fall over. It might look funny but it is stressful beyond belief!

**Step 8:** Protect your cat from visitors who want to do any of the above with her. You're your cat's guardian angel and bodyguard; you're responsible for her safety!

**Step 9:** When you move around the house, never try to walk straight at your cat, even if you want to show her some affection because the stress that causes her is enormous. So walk around your cat in a bow, take another path if possible, slow down or call her and continue together. Hiding places in corners and passageways are great in situations like these because they give your cat the opportunity to get to safety.

**Step 10:** Constantly observe your cat's subtle stress signals (see the Guide, p 112) and think about what just happened and how you can make it safer or more predictable the next time round.



3



### OWNER = PREDICTABLE

Ask your cat in an appropriate way if she wants contact with you and respect her answer.

What you need to teach your cat is that everything she does in terms of contact with you is completely predictable.

This means that she needs to know the outcome in advance. For example, she needs to know that when she approaches you,

A will happen and when she lies sleeping over there, B will happen. Once your cat knows what to expect from you she'll feel calmer 24/7.

#### Practical Step-by-step plan - How to be a predictable owner

- Step 1:** Always approach your cat from the front so that she can see you coming. If you can't, talk to her first to get her attention and make yourself predictable like that.
- Step 2:** Always let her smell your hand first and react according to her body language, following the steps on pp. 204-207 of the Guide.
- Step 3:** Don't punish your cat. Punishment means you think she's doing something wrong and you want to interrupt her. Ponder on why you don't want her to do whatever she's doing in the first place. Why do you need her to stop what's she's at? Your cat should be allowed to do whatever she wants. So let her get on with her own thing and make sure that you first fully understand her behaviour. Your cat has a good reason for doing what she's doing. If it involves behaviour that requires changing the behaviour modification techniques in Part 5 of the Cat Matrix are bound to resolve the issue.



4



## YOUR CATS LOVE LANGUAGE

Love can be tough at times. Cats seem indifferent to us because we give threatening signals. So adjust your behaviour and become irresistible.

Understanding how your cat shows her affection and asks for it to be reciprocated goes a long way when it comes to dealing with undesirable behaviour.

In the Guide, I devoted an entire chapter to this because this has a major impact on how cats interact with us and on how they experience us as social contact.

In my behavioural consultations, I compare it to a situation where we want to shake someone's hand and the other person suddenly gives us a nasty French kiss. Not okay! #miaowtoo

### Practical Step-by-step plan - How to love in cat language

- Step 1:** Only make contact with your cat when she takes the initiative.
- Step 2:** Give 'cat kisses' by gently and slowly blinking your eyes; on no account stare straight into your cat's eyes.
- Step 3:** Experiment to find out where and what she likes to be petted with.
- Step 4:** Sit or lie down on the floor to make contact with your cat.
- Step 5:** Talk to your cat instead of always trying to touch her.
- Step 6:** It is not because your cat gives head bumps that she wants to be touched. She wants to give you head bumps, that's it; it doesn't mean that she always wants that contact to be reciprocated.
- Step 7:** A cat that comes over to lie near you or sits with her head turned towards you shows that she really likes you. It's her way of cuddling. Unfortunately, many owners feel that can't be nearly enough, but it is.

- Step 8:** Don't give too many actual kisses because, to do so, you need to get very close to your cat with your big eyes and mouth, a scary experience if you look at it from an evolutionary perspective. It is not natural for your cat to like this.
- Step 9:** Sit down and turn your back to your cat; she'll interpret it as a sign that she can approach you in all safety.

**ANEKDOTE** – Sofie emailed me to let me know that she had given her neighbour all kinds of tips from the Cat Matrix®. One morning Sofie's neighbour told her very enthusiastically that since she had implemented 2 simple things: more resources around the house and only making contact when the cat took the initiative, her cat is now looking for much more contact with her. So simple and yet so effective!



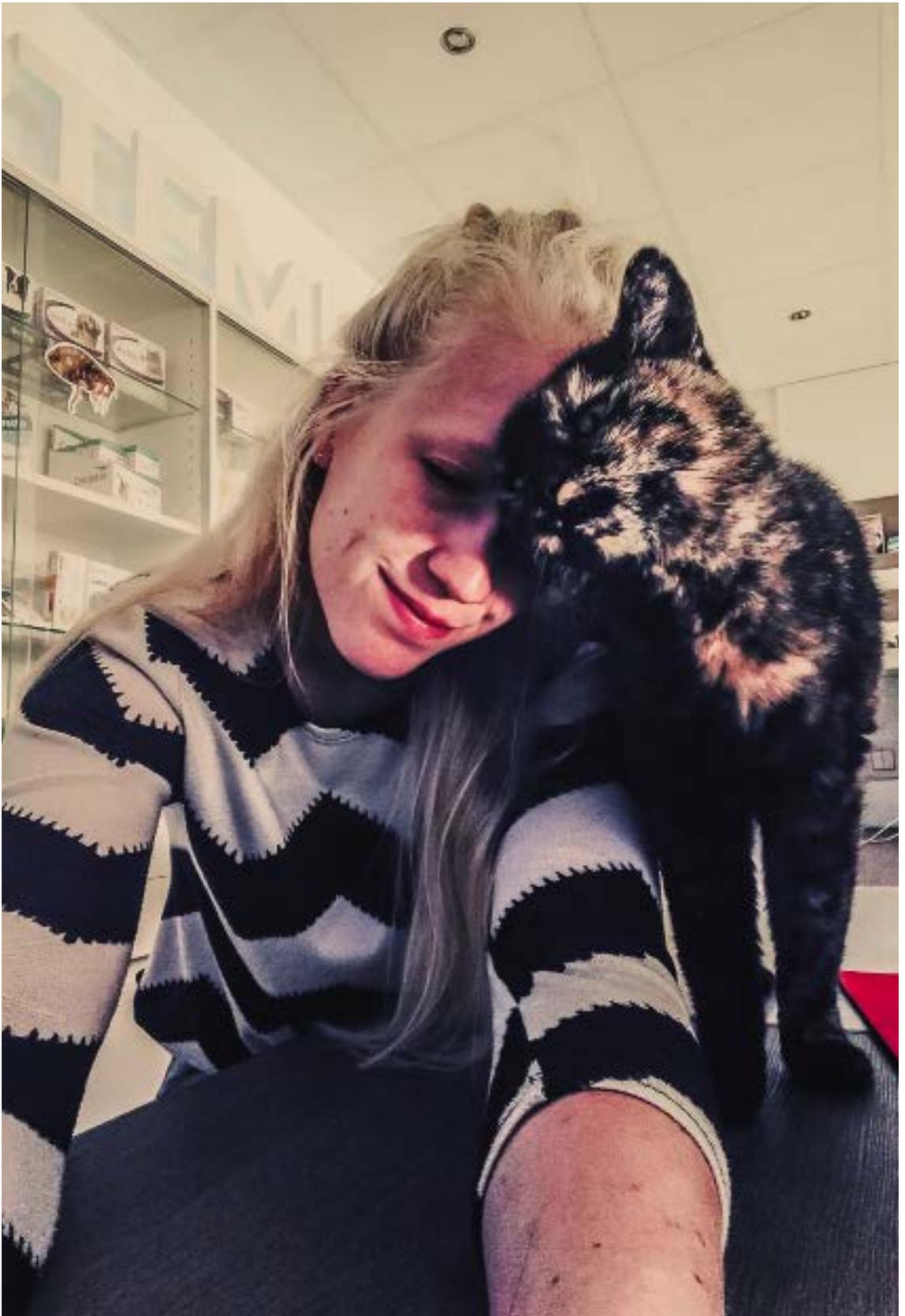


Photo Credit: Lotte Van Neck  
Feline Model: Spriet

5

**CAT SCAN**

Do this experiment and investigate where, how, with what and how long your cat likes to be petted for. The information the Cat Scan provides you with is not only important for you as owner but also for people visiting you and for any professionals your cat may need to see.

It's an exercise I've had owners do for years. The aim of the exercise is to find out where your cat prefers to be petted, what with, and possibly even at what times and where in your home.

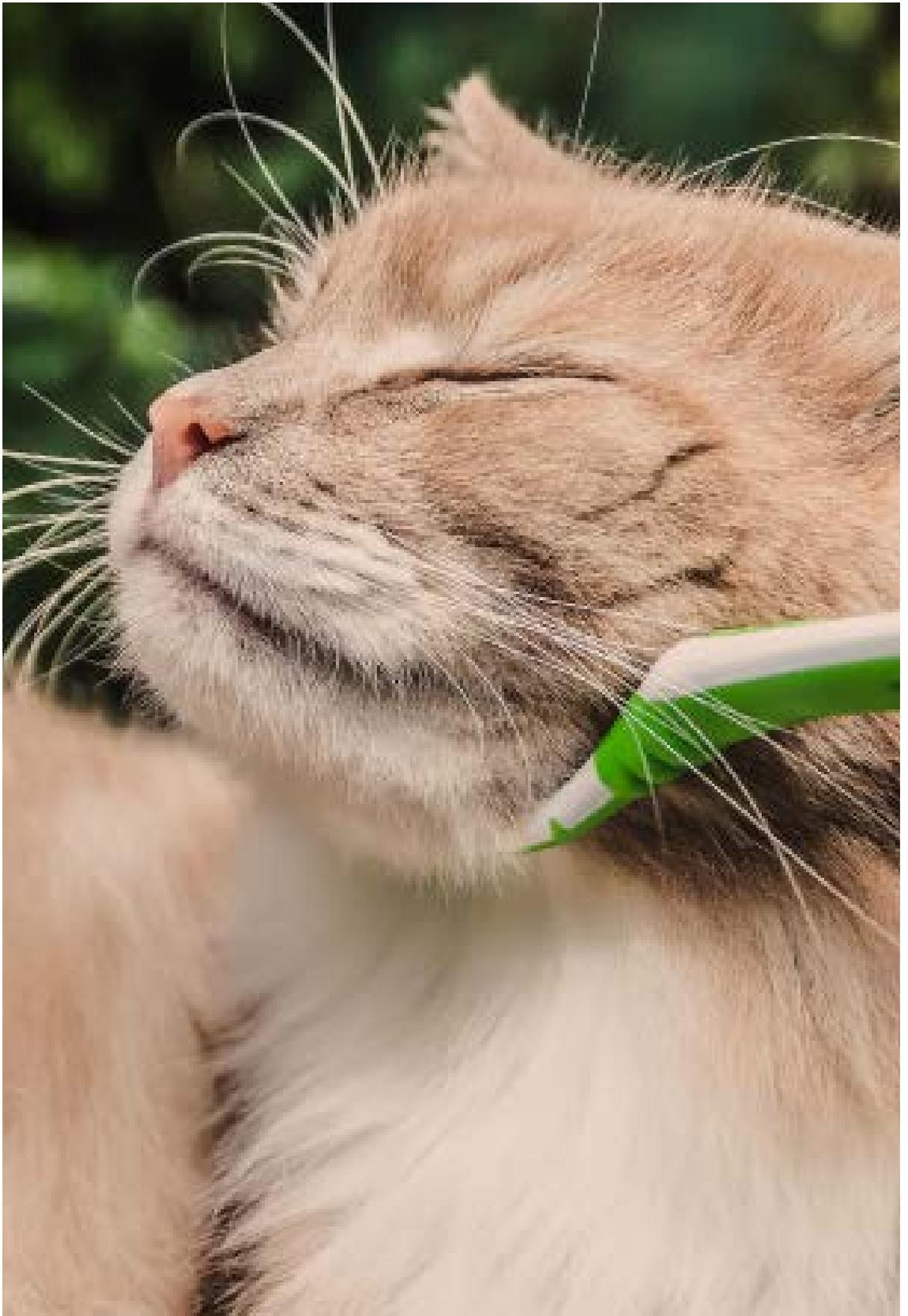
I ask owners to perform this experiment with their cat every day for 14 days. This daily exercise basically involves testing your cat's reaction to stroking at moments your cat is happy and calm.

We experiment with objects such as brushes, feathers, toothbrushes and variations on the hand: 1 finger, 2 fingers, elbow, wrist, palm of our hand, etc. Next, you colour in the zones which the cat responds positively to in the picture of the cat in the exercise (see course material) green. Colour the other zones either orange or red. This insight is also interesting for cat professionals your cat will come into contact with such as your vet, the veterinary assistant, cat trimmer and your cat sitter.

Carry out this exercise thoroughly. The ensuing results will be extremely important in terms of reducing your cat's stress and will give you, as owner, the opportunity to touch your cat in the right way and at the appropriate time so that your cat experiences as little stress as possible.

Ideally you should perform this experiment before your cat starts displaying unwanted behaviour. Whatever the case, it is a valuable and rewarding exercise, even if your cat is displaying undesirable behaviour.





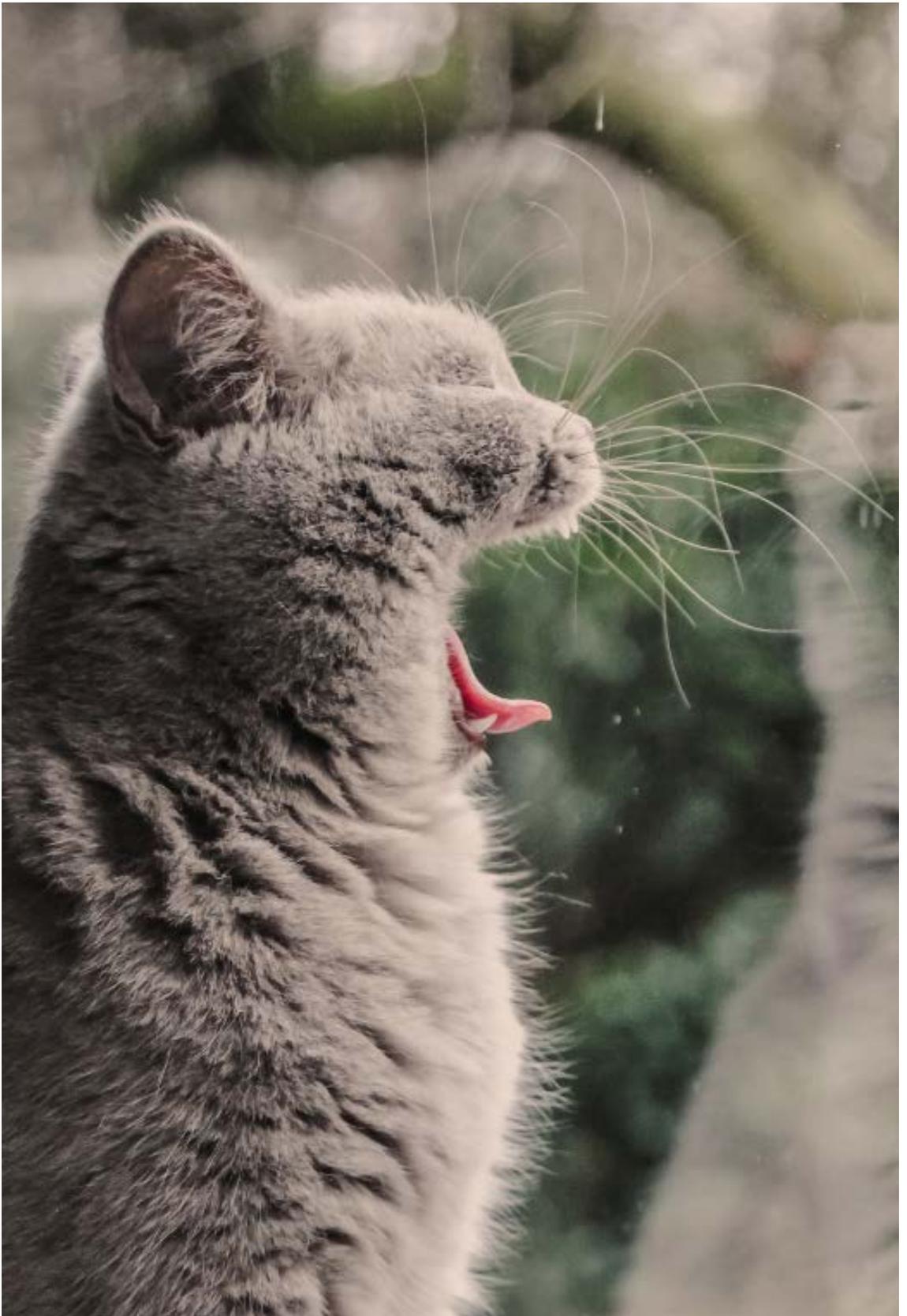


Photo Credit: Kelly De Coninck  
Feline Model: Lilly

6

## IGNORE NATURAL BEHAVIOUR



Leave the cat alone when she engages in natural behaviour, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, scratching, hiding, etc. This way you, as owner, create extra predictability.

This is the first of the 5 'golden' rules which, on the one hand, will have a direct impact on your cat's state of mind and, on the other hand, will prevent that you, as owner, cause your cat unnecessary stress.

All forms of natural behaviour should be completely and utterly ignored by ALL members of your family including visitors and outsiders.

Ignoring means: don't talk, don't look, don't walk across, don't touch, don't even turn towards your cat. This applies to all subsequent steps where you need to ignore your cat. Your cat doesn't need you to help her with behaviour that comes natural to her. On the contrary, interrupting her in that natural behaviour can be an extra stress factor on her threshold of arousal. Cats don't need encouragement or help. All you have to do is to take out the playing rod, channel her behaviour towards success when she doesn't realise it and to give her attention when she wants it.

You're ignoring:

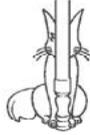
- Eating
- Drinking
- Using the litter tray
- Hunting
- Playing
- Grooming
- Sleeping
- Exploring along routes
- Staring at birds or other prey
- Hiding (= no eye contact)
- E.g.

It goes without saying that we're not talking about essential interventions such as catching something that is about to fall, cats fighting, clear stress signals where you need to intervene, something that is dangerous to your cat, etc.

This rule is necessary if you are faced with undesirable feline behaviour, but can also be very rewarding if you are not yet experiencing any undesirable behaviour in your cat. It is a nice way of preventing feline stress.

**7 I DON'T SEE YOU = YOU DON'T SEE ME**

If you can't look your cat in the eye, you need to pretend she is not there as if she doesn't exist. Why? Because your cat thinks you can't see her.



The second golden rule is very simple but difficult to implement and is also discussed in the Guide. A cat who can't see you thinks you can't see her either. So it can be extremely stressful for your cat to be surprised by you when she initially couldn't see you AND thought you couldn't see her.

She literally thinks you can't see her either and suddenly you've found her.

So now you've become unpredictable and she doesn't know how to avoid it because she didn't see you coming. Literally.

So make sure you always approach your cat from the front and never to touch if you can't look her in the eye first or warn her by talking to her. By sticking to this rule you will give your cat a sense of peace, which she really needs now to lower her stress levels.

If your cat is blind, make a rubbing noise with your fingers or talk to her so she can establish your whereabouts.

**8 REWARD HAPPY BEHAVIOUR**



Is your cat happy? Are you sure? Then reward her with attention, gentle strokes, by pulling out the toy rod, giving her access to the great outdoors or a treat.

Do you ignore stressful behaviour and stimulate happy behaviour? Pay close attention to happy behaviour that she displays of her own accord, because it is that behaviour you want to reward.

Do you see her walking around or sitting with her whiskers forwards, tailing up or completely at rest? Then give her a reward, initiate a moment of play, give her a valerian toy, talk sweetly to her or stroke her for a moment.

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## IGNORING STRESS SIGNALS

Is your cat showing any stress signals? Then ignore your cat completely. Don't only pay attention to clear signals, but above all watch out for subtle signals & ignore your cat!



If your cat is stressed, you need to leave her alone. Your cat has her own way of dealing with stress and, of course, we already have provided her with everything in-house to make this process easier.

Your cat doesn't want to be comforted, she wants to be able to do her own thing, make her own choices without being interrupted, because, right now,

she is busy keeping herself safe.

As discussed in the 'I love Happy Cats Guide', we subdivide stress behaviour into subtle and clear stress signals.

Subtle stress can be recognised, for example, your cat may have her whiskers pressed back, she may be licking herself, yawning, scratching horizontal surfaces in general, you may notice little shivers running through her fur, she may lift one paw, her tail may hang low or she may be grooming her front paws with unusual speed.

Obvious stress signals are not difficult to recognise. They can include hissing, growling, piloerection, a thick tail, flat ears etc. You don't have to be a cat expert to figure out that your cat is not in a great place when she sends out those signals.

Subtle stress should be ignored passively, which means staying where you are, not paying any attention whatsoever to your cat's behaviour, leaving her alone. In doing so, you are not adding to her stress, which is precisely what we want to avoid. Why is that? Because you'll only push her over the edge and may find yourself having to deal with a 'disproportionate response', like spraying, urinating or aggression before long. So look the other way and leave your cat completely alone until she has calmed down.

Are you the one that caused her that stress in the first place? If so, stop what you're doing immediately and start again in a quiet moment. Preferably teach your cat what you want from her through positive training (see PART 4 - STEP 38 of the Cat Matrix).

Obvious stress is something you want to actively ignore, i.e. get up and walk away immediately, even if the stress has nothing to do with you. In this way you immediately give your cat complete freedom to do what she wants to do at that moment.

At least we can be sure then that we are not working against her. If your cat's stress has anything to do with you, immediately stop what you were doing. You possibly should have noticed the subtle stress signals already.

There are, of course, stressful situations where you need to intervene, such as removing the stress factor that triggered your cat's behaviour in the first place.

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### **DISTRACT FROM FEELING STRESSED**

Distract your cat with a toy when you notice her walking around unhappy for any length of time. Reward her with some loving attention when her state of mind changes.



If you notice that you often have to ignore your cat for extended periods of time (> half a day) because she is displaying subtle stress signals for longer, then you can go a step further.

Distract her with something she intrinsically loves, like a long rod that appears out of the blue, a treat or a furry mouse that suddenly rolls over the ground, **WITHOUT** letting her notice you're behind the 'magic'.

Break the pattern of being unhappy and lure her into happy behaviour. Hunting, eating and scent enrichment are the best ways to achieve this. If you notice that her behaviour and state of mind have improved and that she feels happier, you can always make contact by talking to her and extending your hand to reward her for being happy.



## About the author



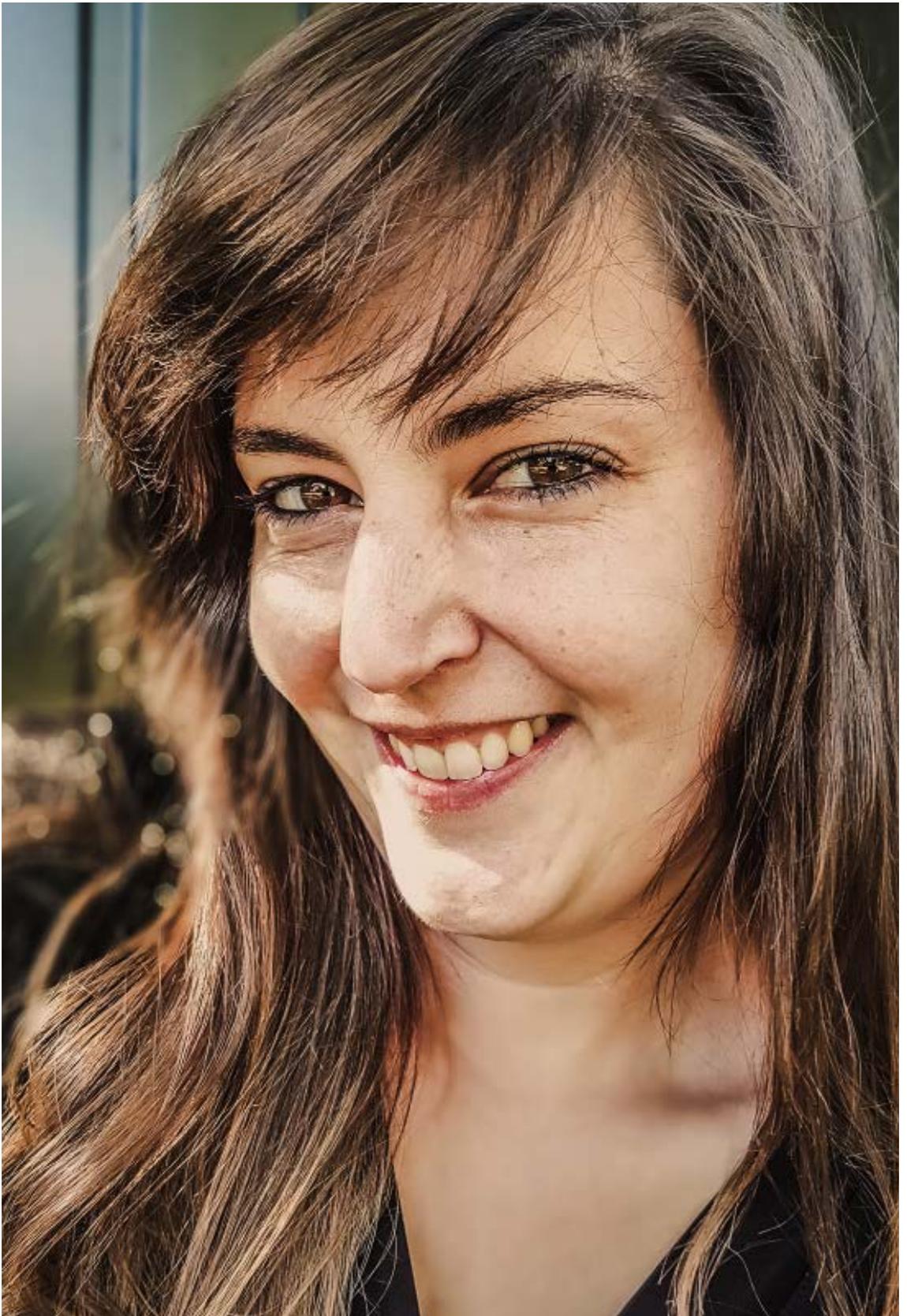
Anneleen Bru is a behavioural therapist for cats and has been on a 'happy cats' mission since 2008. Her calling is to give owners new insights and, above all, to inspire them to think critically about every step they take in the care for, contact with and management of their cats.

She believes that the days of the 'funny' cat movies are numbered, she is convinced that sayings like 'it's only a cat' and the use of aversive punishment will soon be an absolute no-no. There is no doubt that some of it stems from ignorance, more of it from people's love for cats, but that's no longer an excuse. Those days are over. A loving cat owner is an informed cat owner. There is enough information available and this book is just one way of bringing that information to cat owners in an accessible and pleasant way.

Anneleen graduated from the University of Antwerp with a Master's degree in Communication Sciences and then obtained a Master's degree in Companion Animal Behaviour Counselling at the University of Southampton (UK).

Since she set up her company Felinova she has launched one project after another, for example the Felinova Academy, the Poes Café conference, the Felinova Cat Coach® Diploma, a course that has produced 25 graduated coaches so far, the I love Happy Cats books, the Catfluencer® movement, the Happy Cats Community, the Happy Cats Revolution Program and who knows what the future will bring?

In the autumn of 2019, she felt the time had come to focus on her online presence (podcasts, social media, online training) so that she could reach even more cat owners across the world in their own living room and inspire them to look at their cat in a different light. Together with the Association of Animal Behavior Professionals (AABP), which she is the chairman of, she wants to take a new path to further support, bring together and empower behavioural professionals working with pets.



## Credits

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## Colofon

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