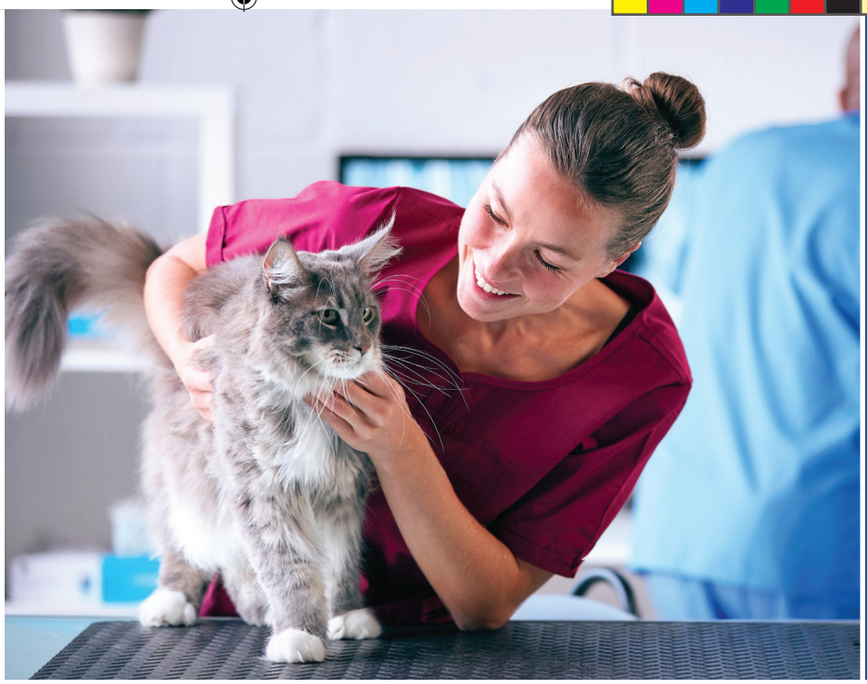
Cat Friendly
The Standards of Feline Care



Embracing Cat Friendly Language

Out with the Old, In with the New

Cats are sentient animals whose emotional states are critical to their health and wellbeing, yet their subtle behaviors are easily misunderstood. Because cats primarily communicate through their behavior, body language, and other subtle cues, it is our responsibility as veterinary professionals to recognize and understand their emotional needs, as well as adjust our approaches throughout the veterinary visit. When misunderstood, feline behavior can be misinterpreted as spite, anger, or intent. In reality, cats act to support their survival and sense of safety. Using accurate, respectful terminology helps us better understand our patients, improve interactions and handling, and strengthen the human-cat bond.

- Cat Friendly language and terminology are essential to fostering respect and a positive experience for the cat, their caregiver, and the veterinary team.
- Using terminology that promotes an unbiased understanding of the underlying emotions motivating the cat's behavior is essential, as feline emotions drive behaviors that support their survival.
- In the scientific literature, feline emotions are categorized as positive or negative, also described as "engaging" and "protective."
  - "Engaging" (positive) emotions are those in which the cat is seeking something they need or want, such as comfort, food, or social interaction.
  - "Protective" (negative) emotions occur when the cat is trying to keep themself safe from perceived threats. **Protective emotions prompt self-protective behavioral responses which can create an unpleasant veterinary visit for the cat, caregiver, and veterinary team members.**

- Although "positive" and "negative" are scientific terms, the everyday language often associated with them can unintentionally introduce value judgments, making a cat's disposition or behavior seem good or bad instead of viewing it as a normal emotional response.
- Using the terms "engaging" and "protective" helps more accurately reflect the underlying emotional state the cat is experiencing.
- A cat's emotional state can change over the course of the visit depending on the environment, interactions, and their comfort.

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Using Cat Friendly language and terminology takes practice and consistency within the entire team. Here are a few tips for success:

1

Assign a Cat Friendly Advocate to educate the team on Cat Friendly language and terminology. They will model appropriate communication, encourage accountability, and help build a culture that consistently recognizes and respects the cat's changing emotional state.

2

Celebrate the team's use of positive communication and terminology in respect to a cat's emotions (share the specifics with the veterinary team including who, how, and why it helped).

3

Use consistent Cat Friendly terminology in medical records to reinforce the use of proper language when describing feline emotions and interactions in the veterinary environment.

- If you are using AI scribe software, you may need to teach your scribe to change certain words (e.g., "caregiver" vs "owner" or "protective" vs "aggressive").

4

Also noting the cat's preferences for interactions in their medical record will enhance feline welfare and human safety at current and future visits (e.g., preferred locations, order of examination, treats, sample collection methods).

Definitions

Stress: The physiological response to emotional change as a result of a perceived threat or an upset to physiological homeostasis.

Distress: The impact of all protective emotions when the perceived stressors exceed the individual's coping ability. Cats can feel acute or chronic distress when exposed to a stressor that does not abate or the cat is unable to cope and return to a normal baseline state. Cats develop chronic distress when they cannot predict or control a situation.

Engaging (Positive) Emotions: There are four engaging emotions, but the one primarily seen in companion cats is desire-seeking. This emotion leads cats to hunt and seek food and comfort in order to benefit their survival. These emotions can result in low states of arousal (such as food or attention seeking) or high states of arousal (such as busyness, wiggling, and exploration), as well as predatory behavior (play biting or scratching) toward humans.

Protective (Negative) Emotions: There are also four protective emotions, with three commonly seen during veterinary visits: fear-anxiety, pain, and frustration. These protective emotions occur when the cat perceives a threat to their survival, either within the environment or during interactions. **Protective emotions prompt self-protective behavioral responses.**

Protective behavioral responses to fear-anxiety and/or pain emotions: The three most common protective behavioral responses are inhibition, avoidance, and repulsion. The cat's selected response is based on the individual, their previous experiences, and the current situation in which they are experiencing the emotion. Importantly, these three behavioral responses are of equal significance to the cat's emotional health and welfare.

- ***Inhibition:*** A passive gathering of information. The cat will be listening, watching, and gathering scent information. The cat may appear to "freeze," but other signs may occur such as tense muscles, crouching, and/or a ventral flat posture. A cat with inhibition may be so fearful-anxious that they don't perform normal behaviors. In hospitalized cats, this can lead to inappetence, lack of elimination, disruption of normal sleep, and inactivity.
- ***Avoidance:*** Cats may display passive eye avoidance, hiding, and backing away and/or retreating or fleeing from human interaction, other animals, or specific environmental stimuli.
- ***Repelling:*** This response is intended to increase the physical distance and decrease the interaction between the cat and their perceived threat. Repelling behaviors usually occur when the cat has already displayed inhibition and/or avoidance behaviors, either at the current or previous appointment, but the cat has not found them to be successful. Repelling behaviors are hissing and/or growling, vocalization, swatting/swiping/striking/scratching, or biting.

Frustration: A high state of arousal that occurs when cats fail to sufficiently obtain the goals of their engaging or protective behaviors. Frustration with desire-seeking emotions can take the form of attention-seeking behaviors (e.g., repetitive biting or pawing at/through cage door). Frustration with protective emotions can take the form of displacement behaviors (rapid grooming, gulping), repetitive behaviors (persistent vocalization, pacing), disruptive behaviors (disrupting cage contents), and confrontational behaviors (growling, scratching, or biting).

House-soiling: Urination or defecation (or both) outside of the designated litter box area.

Caregiver: A person or persons responsible for a cat's physical and emotional wellbeing by providing essential needs (e.g., food, water, litter box cleaning, companionship, safe spaces, grooming, and medical care).

Learn More at catvets.com/CatFriendly

Cat Friendly Language and Terminology

Words Not to Use		
Sassy	Fractious	Evil
Bad	Angry	Nasty
Spicy	Naughty	Other derogatory terms

→

Cat Friendly Terminology
Protective emotions (fear-anxiety, pain, or frustration) and their self-protective behavioral responses

Why Change?

Using these words erroneously labels the cat as “mean” instead of what is really happening (they are displaying protective emotions and behavioral responses). The cat’s intent is not to cause harm but to protect themself. Using these terms may cause caregivers and other team members to feel upset or frustrated that a cat is being judged, not respected, and misunderstood.

In addition, these labels can shift attention away from the cat’s emotional state and the factors contributing to their behavior. When a cat is described as “mean,” “bad,” “fractious,” etc., it may reduce recognition that the veterinary team needs to adjust their approach to support the cat’s emotional health, reduce stress, and improve interactions. This can increase the risk of a negative veterinary experience for the cat and caregiver, as well as the risk of injury.

More descriptive terminology captures the feline perspective. The team’s understanding of each cat’s emotional health allows us to enhance feline welfare and human safety by making Cat Friendly environmental and interactional adjustments tailored to each cat’s needs.

Documenting the correct terminology for the cat’s emotions (fearful-anxious, painful, or frustrated) in the medical record, as well the adjusted approaches taken, further supports safer, more positive future visits; negative terminology does not.

Words Not to Use			
Aggressive	Fight/Fighter	Uncooperative	Stubborn

→

Cat Friendly Terminology
Repelling behaviors or repulsion

Why Change?

In addition to the above reasoning, appropriately describing repelling behaviors allows the team to create a plan to prevent or minimize them. Judgment-based terms can lead people to believe that the cat simply is “difficult,” instead of recognizing that the cat is displaying repelling behaviors in response to perceived threats, discomfort, or distress. Using the correct term encourages the veterinary team to identify contributing factors and adjust their approach, which supports feline welfare, improves the veterinary experience, and reduces the risk of injury.

Words Not to Use
Restrain/Restraint

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Cat Friendly Terminology	
Cat Friendly interactions	Gentle handling

Why Change?

Cat Friendly interactions focus on non-physical communication and assessment of the cat’s emotional state, gentle and respectful handling, and physical interactions that minimize feline stressors, which leads to positive patient and human outcomes. Gentle physical contact is designed to keep the cat as comfortable as possible by providing a sense of control and choice, whereas “restraint” involves manual, mechanical methods that reduce the cat’s ability to move and cope, which takes away their sense of control and increases distress and the potential for human injury. “Interaction” reminds veterinarians that the experience should be a cooperative one between the veterinary team and the patient.

Terminology of restraint precludes consideration of gentle and cooperative interactions that provide a more positive veterinary experience. Veterinarians trained to think of handling as “restraint” are more likely to employ force that causes protective emotions and distress, leading to protective behaviors and a negative experience that will be remembered by the cat for future visits and can lead to human injury.

Read more: Cat Friendly Veterinary Interaction Guidelines – catvets.com/interaction

Words Not to Use	→	Cat Friendly Terminology
Freeze		Inhibition

Why Change?

Properly describing the behavioral responses associated with inhibition helps the veterinary team identify these behaviors and prepare the environment and their approach/interactions to support the cat's needs.

Inhibited behaviors are not limited to freezing and are more likely not to be recognized if only using the term "freeze."

Historically, the freeze response terminology implies that the cat is "easy to work with" and may not be recognized as a concern by the veterinary team due to the cat's passivity; however, identifying this behavior as inhibition reminds the veterinary team that the cat is in a protective emotional state. Recognizing how best to respond to these patients prevents progression from inhibition to avoidance and/or repulsion. By using the term "inhibition," the veterinary team can shift the cat into either an engaging (positive) state or one that allows for safe inhibited behaviors (e.g., giving them a hiding option such as the bottom half of the carrier, a cat bed, or a loose towel).

Words Not to Use		→	Cat Friendly Terminology
Flight	Flight risk		Avoidance

Why Change?

Avoidance is driven by fear-anxiety and/or pain and reflects protective (negative) emotions, as the cat attempts to escape a perceived threat. Using correct terminology helps the veterinary team recognize avoidance early and respond appropriately (e.g., not chasing or attempting to capture the cat) to prevent escalation to repelling behaviors.

Words Not to Use	→	Cat Friendly Terminology
Owner		Caregiver

Why Change?

The term "owner" can imply a one-sided relationship of possession rather than a mutual bond between a cat and their caregiver. The term "caregiver" focuses on nurturing and the provision of needs (e.g., food, health, safety) rather than legal and financial ownership. Survey data demonstrates that caregivers do not prefer the term "owner."

Words Not to Use	→	Cat Friendly Terminology
Referring to cats as "it"		Use the cat's name or "he"/"she"
		Or "cats," "the cat," or "they" when speaking about cats in general

Why Change?

Calling a cat "it" reduces a living, sentient being to an impersonal object. Many caregivers consider their cats to be cherished family members and it is a sign of affection and respect to call them by their name. Avoid using "it" even to refer to cats who are not companion pets.

Words Not to Use	→	Cat Friendly Terminology
Inappropriate elimination (urination or elimination)		House-soiling

Why Change?

Cats do not perceive that elimination in these locations is "inappropriate," so "house-soiling" reframes the focus on the action that is concerning to the caregiver and its behavioral, environmental, or medical causes, rather than presuming a spiteful or emotional intention by the cat.

Reframing this terminology allows the veterinary team to diagnose the cause of house-soiling and treat it appropriately.

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