

5 Things These Independent Companion Pets Need to Thrive

Owners often make the mistake that because these pets are so self-sufficient, they don't need much time or attention. That's unfortunate because, in essence, you're keeping a captive wild animal when you own one of these popular loving pets, and they have unique needs for their health and happiness.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many people choose a feline companion over a dog because cats tend to be lower maintenance pets
- The mistake many cat parents make is in not understanding that their pet's independent nature comes with a set of unique needs
- Providing kitty with indoor environmental enrichment is the key to keeping her happy and healthy
- It's also important to offer your cat opportunities to safely experience the outdoors in good weather

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Many pet parents intentionally choose a kitty companion over a dog because cats tend to require less time and attention than their canine counterparts. But what people often don't take into account is the reason kitties are less reliant on humans: they haven't been "tamed" to the same extent as dogs.

Despite thousands of years of domestication, cats have retained more of their wild nature than dogs. They are a distinctly different species, after all, and it's unlikely our feline friends will ever depend upon or collaborate with humans in the many ways dogs do.

So for people looking for a pet who doesn't need a lot of hands-on attention, the good news is most cats are indeed more self-sufficient on a day-to-day basis than dogs. However, what you have with an indoor cat is a kind of captive wild animal.

To keep Tiger happy and healthy, it's important to understand and accommodate his unique feline needs. In return, he'll be a devoted and self-reliant companion who fits perfectly into your busy lifestyle.

Indoor Environmental Enrichment

The term "environmental enrichment" means to improve or enhance the living situation of captive animals to optimize their health and quality of life. The more comfortable your cat feels in your home, the lower her stress level. Reducing kitty's stress is extremely important in keeping her physically healthy.

Enriching your cat's surroundings means creating minimally stressful living quarters, and reducing or eliminating changes in her life that cause anxiety. Any variation to a kitty's routine is experienced as stressful. Cats need to feel they're in control of their living situation.

Enrichment may also mean adding or changing things in your pet's environment that encourage her to enjoy natural feline activities like climbing to a high spot or hunting prey in the form of a cat toy.

Because change is unnerving for your kitty, nothing should be forced on her. If you decide to purchase a cat tree, for example, place it in an area of your home where she spends a lot of time, and let her discover it on her own terms.

Indoor Environment Zones

There are several components to a cat's indoor environment, and each should be considered from the perspective of your kitty. These include:

1. **Food, water and litterbox locations** — In the wild, cats not only hunt prey, they are prey for other animals. They feel most vulnerable while eating, drinking or eliminating. This vulnerability is what causes a fearful response when a cat's food dish or litterbox is in a noisy or high traffic area.

The essentials of your kitty's life — food, water and his bathroom, should be located in a safe, secure location away from any area that is noisy enough to startle him or make him feel trapped and unable to escape.

2. **Places for climbing, scratching, resting and hiding** — Cats are natural climbers and scratchers, and those urges don't disappear because kitty lives indoors. Your cat also needs her own resting place and a hiding place (sometimes these are the same spot) where she feels untouchable.

Cats prefer to interact with other creatures (including humans) on their terms, and according to their schedule. Remember: Well-balanced indoor kitties are given the opportunity to feel in control of their environment.

Jackson Galaxy has written several **books on creating feline environmental enrichment around the house** that I highly recommend.

3. **Consistency in interactions with humans** — Your cat feels most comfortable when his daily routine is predictable. Performing little rituals when you leave the house and return can help kitty feel more comfortable with the comings and goings of humans in the household.

A ritual can be as simple as giving him a treat when you leave and a good scratch behind the ears as soon as you get home.

Playtime should also be consistent. Learn what types of cat toys he responds to and engage him in play, on his timetable. Of course, while you can encourage him to play, it's pointless to force the issue. Oh, and when he's had enough, he's had enough!

4. **Sensory stimulation** — Visual stimulation: Some cats can gaze out the window for hours. Others are captivated by fish in an aquarium. Some even enjoy kitty videos.

Auditory stimulation: When you're away from home, provide background noise for kitty that is similar to the ambient sounds she hears when you're home, for example, music or a TV at low volume.

Olfactory stimulation: You can stimulate your cat's keen sense of smell with cat-safe herbs or synthetic feline pheromones.

5. **Same-species friends** — This can be a sensitive area. The way cats interact with each other is very different from most other animals. Trying to predict how two or more cats will get on living under the same roof is nearly impossible.

Females tend to get along better with other cats than males do, and intact males can be a special challenge in a multi-cat household.

Problems with inter-cat aggression can arise when a new cat is brought home, when two cat owners blend their feline families, and even among cats that have lived peacefully together for years.

Because of the complex nature of feline social structures, if you have a multi-cat household and there are problems, or you're hoping to add a new cat to the family, I recommend you talk with your veterinarian or an animal behavior specialist.

Often there are things you can do to minimize problems with aggression or other undesirable behaviors.

Your Indoor Cat Needs a Chance to Get Outside in Good Weather

Ideally, your kitty gets to spend some time outdoors in nice weather in controlled situations such as on a leash walk, or inside a protective enclosure. The enclosure (sometimes called a "catio" or "cat patio") can be as **simple** or as **deluxe** as you like.

The idea is allow kitty safe access to the outdoors, as well as the chance to put all four paws on the earth. Safe access is key. Allowing your cat to run around loose outside is never a good idea. It presents much more risk to his health and longevity than keeping him indoors.

Kitties with free access to the outdoors are much more likely to be exposed to disease, poisoned, hit by a car or attacked by dogs, wild animals or other cats.

Sources and References

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