



CATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

Why do cats do the things they do? Ask cat behaviorist Kristiina Wilson.

Most mornings when I wake up to my cat delicately touching my cheek with his paw, I am involuntarily reminded of my high school English class. Though I remember little else, our brief unit on Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* remains fixed and harrowing in my memory. "When you look into his eyes, you are seeing your own emotions reflected back at you—nothing else," Pi's father says of a caged tiger. And it was with this fear and yearning that I spoke with cat behaviorist Kristiina Wilson, determined to get a final answer on the cat questions that keep me Googling into the wee hours. Wilson has worked with cats for over twenty years and currently lives with her wife and their eleven cats. She now consults with individual clients, conservation projects, and other organizations to help promote cat welfare, while her cat Steve amasses Instagram followers with his affinity for speech buttons. During our conversation, Steve made a vocal cameo, Mimi purred against the camera, and the two of us toiled with the biggest question of all: Do cats really love us?

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Culturally, there are so many stereotypes about cats. Is there a simple way that you would describe cat psychology and behavior?

Every species is different. Most people think that cats are really asocial, especially when they contrast them with dogs, but cats are really, really social. We have a group of eleven cats in our house. They're all good friends and they hang out all the time. Something that's misunderstood about cat behavior is that people really think: "I can get one cat, I can leave it alone in the house. It'll be fine. They're antisocial." But they're really not.

Do cats perceive humans as just bigger cats?

We can't know exactly because we can't communicate with them directly and say, "Hey, what do you think of me?" A lot of popular science writing describes cats as seeing you as a bigger cat. But I think cats are smarter than that. They know the difference between a prey animal and others. In our house, we have four separate gangs: the stripey, the tabbies, the all-white, and the tuxedo cats. They're always together in their same color-coded groups. So they clearly self-identify and want to hang out with the ones who look like them. They're not stupid.

But I do think they think of us as family. When they put their noses up against you—bunting—they’re marking you as family. And you have to remember that cats are the only animal that has domesticated themselves, which is really interesting.

I wanted to ask you about that.

Humans domesticated farm animals and dogs because we figured out they could do work for us. Cats domesticated themselves. They likely realized humans had grain, which attracted mice, and people were nice to them. So they thought, “OK, we’ll continue to hang out, but we’re not changing our behavior at all.” And they really haven’t. If humans disappeared, domestic cats would likely be A-OK.

Having worked with so many cats, have you noticed any notable individual differences or quirks? For example, I used to have two cats and one would always clean up after the other. I always wondered what was personality and what was instinct.

Oh, 100%. And if there are behavioral issues, such as toileting in the wrong place, it’s important to know that animals do that to tell you something. It’s a last-ditch communication. Cats don’t operate out of spite.

But we all have our personality quirks. There are no two people that are alike, and there are no two cats that are alike. At the risk of anthropomorphizing, I do think it’s funny that we are always surprised that animals have personalities. Of course they do! They’re people! They’re not human-people, but they’re individuals.

They have personhood.

They do. Exactly.

Yet despite choosing domestication, and creating those human-cat family bonds, people often say, well if you died, your cat would be the first to eat you.

Yeah. But also, so what? You’re dead. So why is that a problem? Why is this the metric? Like sometimes

Cats are full of love and kindness and happiness, and they show us again and again that they want to share space with us and be with us and mark us.

you gotta do what you gotta do, you know? What is this loyalty test? It’s so weird.

That’s a great point. But what about hunting without necessity? Even if you feed your cat regularly, they will still go outside and kill birds. Indoor cats will “kill” fake mice and deliver them to you. What is the impulse behind those gifts?

There are a lot of thoughts on this. When cats go out and hunt, they’re not necessarily sustenance hunting; they also hunt for sport. That’s why they still like to play-hunt even when they’re adults. So maybe they’re killing to kill, and then they bring it home to get praise.

But another theory that rings true to me is that they’re bringing it home because they’ve never seen you kill anything. They’re a little concerned that maybe you’re stupid and hungry. A mom cat teaches her kids to hunt by bringing them a fully dead thing she’s killed. She gets them to play with it, and once she feels like they’ve understood that, she brings home a half-dead thing. Again she gets them to play around with that, and then eventually she brings home a fully alive thing and is like, have at it.

Wow. That’s a very good lesson.

Right. So I do think a lot of time that’s what they’re doing when they bring you a gift. They’re just like, “I have never seen you provide for yourself, please let me help you.” But again, who knows, it could be that they’re just being like, “Look, I am so amazing I should be the boss of this house.”

I was wondering about that dynamic, because with dogs there’s this whole notion of hierarchy and asserting dominance.

A few years after that study came out, the researcher was like, “Whoops, I

was totally wrong. I’m so sorry.” But nobody paid attention to him except for people in the animal behavior community. Everyone else was like, “No, we’re just gonna base all of our popular science off of this even though it’s totally wrong!” There’s no pack structure with one head and then a bunch of descending members.

But cats do have a social structure. In our house, Steve is the head. You can tell because he washes everyone else, so his smell is on everybody. It’s kind of him saying, “I own you.” He sits higher than everyone else. He eats first. But he also rules with love. Any new cats that come in, he washes them right away, like: “Hey man, it’s nice to see you. Come join the group.”

It’s like a benevolent frat house.

That’s such a good way to describe it. He is such a frat boy. He loves girls with big boobs. He likes to watch sports on TV. He is 100% a frat boy.

If you want to add a second cat into your household, do you need to assess whether that cat will be compatible? Do most cats eventually get along?

They can get along—yes. Will they be best friends? No. You can’t force that. You can get them to a place where they will tolerate each other if you provide enough environmental modifications so that they can always be on different levels from each other. But, you know, sometimes there’s people you just don’t like, and you can’t say why. Cats are the same way.

I do recommend that people don’t add kittens when they have older cats. Just like my 80-year-old grandma doesn’t wanna live with a teen, those are just not good energies to put together. But otherwise, if you do slow introductions with lots of positive reinforcement, it’s pretty easy to have successful introductions.



“Everything she does has a reason for it, and all her plans are properly schemed and thought out beforehand, for she never fails to look before she leaps. Why, my reader, with all due respect to your intellectual powers, if you were to be changed into a cat for four and twenty hours, and had a cat’s routine of pleasure and duty to perform, with all your wisdom you would be as dead as a dried haddock before sun-down.” — From the “Sagacity of Cats” chapter in Gordon Stables’ 1876 book *Cats: Their Points and Characteristics*.

Similarly, with cats and people, you’ll often hear that if you’re getting a cat, you have to let the cat choose you. Is that true?

So this is going to sound weird, because I am a science-based person. When I use the word “energy,” it’s not in a woo-woo way—it refers to looking at things that we don’t normally look at, like body posture and breathing. All of these go into what might read as someone’s energy, right? We don’t necessarily pick up these little things, but cats pick up on all of that stuff. They spend their days looking at us and watching us. So sometimes there are cats who just vibe more with whatever we’re putting out. Those are the cats that choose us. And cats who don’t like the way we smell or the little movements we make, they’re like: “No, not for me. I’m not into that.”

I’m curious to learn about what humans can provide for cats.

We have pets in our home and we love them so much, but they don’t have a lot of agency. And I think it’s really important to give some of that agency back to them, especially if they’re having behavioral issues.

So there is this idea called the five pillars of a healthy feline environment. They include a safe place that gives them a sense of enclosure and seclusion; multiple and separated resources; opportunity for play and predatory behavior; and positive, consistent, and predictable human-cat interaction. I can’t stress enough how important predictability and consistency is to cats. They have such a good internal clock, and they love schedules. If you just set up a few things that are consistent for your cat, they will be so happy. They love it. Then, the last pillar is an environment that respects the importance of your cat’s sense of smell. They need to mark their scent around the house, to say, “This is my home, it’s safe, everything’s great.” So wash their bedding or toys on a case-by-case basis so that everything smells like them.



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If all else fails, take a cue from jazzman Charles Mingus' 1972 pamphlet *The Charles Mingus CAT-alog for Toilet Training Your Cat*, featuring his cat, Night-life: "Don't bug the cat now, don't rush him, because you might throw him off."



That totally makes sense, but it never would've occurred to me at all.

Nobody should feel bad about not knowing this stuff. The reason dogs are such popular pets is because we've selectively bred them to be like us. The psychology is very similar. But cat psychology is often the opposite of what we would do. For example, being negatively reinforced makes us avoid doing something again. To cats, that's attention. It doesn't matter if it's bad attention, they'll keep doing the thing you don't want because you're giving them attention. So they're just a little bit harder to understand. Our instinct for what to do with them is backwards.

It's funny that an animal that seemingly acts so indifferent in fact really wants to be seen by us.

They do. They want our attention, and usually when we think they're indifferent, they're showing that they feel safe around us. They are relaxed enough to not interact. My wife and I made up a song about our cats called "Butt to Butt," because the way that they show that they really love and trust each other is to sit facing away from one another with their butts together. It seems rude, but for cats, face-to-face is aggressive. Facing away says, "I'm not worried about you. I totally trust you. I'm being vulnerable by facing

the other way, and you're also facing the other way. This is how much we trust each other, right?"

They're not indifferent. But humans often have very insecure attachment, right? And cats, once they really trust you, they're very secure. They're just chilling. They don't need constant reassurance.

That's so beautiful. It seems to me like the height of intimacy, that pleasant and trusting relationship where you can sit quietly beside someone else. This brings me to my final question, the one everyone wants to know: Do cats love us?

If you want the science answer—how do you quantify love? How would you even explain that to a cat—to anyone? How would you explain to a toddler just learning the language? So the science answer is who knows. But my answer is yes, of course they do. They're full of love and kindness and happiness, and they show us again and again that they want to share space with us and be with us and mark us.

The button thing that I taught Steve isn't speech or language acquisition, it's just associative concept training. But lately when I do something that he asks me to do, he'll push his "snuggle" button. And I interpret that as his way of saying thank you. So I don't have anything smart to say about this except of course they do, of course they do. 🐱

