



# Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor



Who is the perfect client? **Vicky Halls** investigates...

**A**s knowledge of cat behaviour is increasing, both within veterinary practice and the pet owning public, so is the demand for the services of the cat behaviour counsellor\* (CBC). I have written a great deal over the past few years about the sort of problems that are tackled – house soiling or aggression, for example – and the consequences for the cat or cats in the household. Looking back, however, I have written very little about what it's like from the owner's perspective. How does it feel to be the cat behaviour counsellor's client?

Many owners have confessed some trepidation prior to my visit: "Will I be judged on the quality of care? Is it my fault? Will I be confronted with complicated science that I don't understand? What is involved? What is expected of me?" So, with the intention of demystifying the process, here are some insights into being a CBC's perfect client.

## Contact with a CBC

Contact with a CBC should be through your veterinary practice. Your vet will look for a medical reason for the concerning behaviour so you will need to describe exactly what is occurring – when and where – so that all possible causes can be identified or eliminated. If nothing physical is found then a behavioural referral will be made. Your surgery may have someone to whom they refer regularly or, at the very least, details of a member of a specific organisation, such as the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors. It is important to make sure that the person or company you are seeing is experienced and reputable and this is probably easier for your vet to establish than you. Once referred you will either be contacted directly or the onus will be on you to make the first approach, either by telephone or email.

## A listening ear

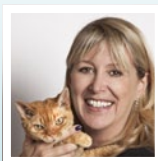
All CBCs should be trained appropriately to convey their feelings of empathy and understanding and their appreciation of the consequences of 'problem' behaviour for the owners and their families. Cat owners can be extremely tolerant of their pets' behaviour – problems are allowed to continue, often for a considerable period of time, due to a lack of understanding of the significance of the behaviour, belief that nothing can be done or a burden of guilt that the owner is somehow responsible. The family often adopts chores based around the problem and over a period of time these compensatory or 'fire-fighting' measures become the norm. Relationships can be fraught between partners if differing views exist regarding any action that needs to be taken and owner stress is often the consequence. When the problem is eventually brought to the attention of a pet behaviour counsellor, it is common for the owner to state that he or she is "at the end of my tether". If this resonates with you then be reassured that this is a familiar scenario for the CBC and every effort will be made to ensure you feel listened to and understood.

## Home visit consultation

Cat behaviour counselling is, arguably, an art form and each practitioner will have their own 'artistic interpretation' of the science. Most consultations take place in the owner's home, each one taking between two and four hours, depending on the complexity of the case. It is normally recommended that all family members are present, but if you feel that any babies or small children in your household will be distracting for you, it is worth making alternative arrangements for child care on the day. It will be useful, however, to discuss with the CBC how your children interact with your cat and vice versa.

Prior to the consultation you will probably be asked to complete a pre-consultation questionnaire, which will be studied, together with the vet's referral and your cat's medical history, before you meet. The questionnaire will cover information regarding your cat – or cats – the people in the household, other pets, the environment, lifestyle, diet and the nature of the problem behaviour. The reality of most cases, once explored in depth, is that there are multiple presenting problems affecting potentially more than one cat in the household. It is definitely worth putting in the time and effort

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to complete this questionnaire as it may be very revealing; many clients say that it focuses their mind and often puts a different perspective on things. If there are matters that concern you, or behaviour you have seen, that isn't covered on the form you are completing, note them separately to ensure that the information is relayed on the day. Keeping a diary of the problem behaviour or taking video footage prior to the consultation will aid the CBC in reaching an assessment.

It is entirely likely that you have more than one cat – the majority of owners who seek help from a cat behaviour counsellor have multiple cats – and the CBC will need to establish whether they represent one cohesive social group or exist as pairs, factions and singletons occupying the same environment, resulting in conflict and tension. Part of the initial consultation process will involve questioning regarding your observation of any friendly or conflict behaviour. This will be taken into consideration when a programme of change is put in place.

All information you provide to the CBC is your view of your cat's behaviour and the problem, which will almost inevitably be anthropomorphic – attributing human thoughts and feelings to animals – and require some interpretation. It is surprisingly easy for owners to interpret cat behaviour and establish beliefs about what they are seeing. Every subsequent observation will always be judged based on those beliefs; it is very easy to disappear down dark alleys of misunderstanding when this happens! Phrases to avoid when discussing your cat's behaviour probably include 'dominant', 'naughty', 'devil eyes', 'jealous' and 'schizo' as, although you know exactly what they mean for you, it will take a little unravelling.

During the consultation, the counsellor will be constantly observing your interaction with the cat and vice versa and any cat-to-cat interaction. This will reveal much more than the verbal history alone. As a result of the information gleaned, the CBC will reach an assessment of the motivation for the behaviour and communicate this to you; it is likely that there will be something that is causing your cat to be stressed. Solutions will be offered together with an expectation of possible results; some situations will require management rather than 'cure'.

You will then be given a programme to follow, usually, in writing. If there are any queries at this stage they should be voiced, as your understanding of what is expected may mean the difference between success and failure. The CBC will offer support and guidance for a period of time, hopefully, to ensure that any changes necessary are made to get the best results. Most programmes last for six to eight weeks but some have elements that are necessary to remain in place for the lifetime of your cat. You will be requested to keep in touch with the CBC via telephone or email or there may be subsequent visits.



Photo: istockphoto.com/Daniel Laflor

## Behaviour programme

When creating a programme of change for addressing the problem behaviour the CBC will work with many interventions including changes to the environment or to the way you interact with your cat, 'behaviour modification' techniques – such as desensitisation – synthetic pheromones and drug therapy. There is rarely any direct 'training' involved and most programmes focus on changes that alter your cat's perception of the environment and social situation. The programme, if skilfully devised, will be practical and specific to your circumstances. If at any time you feel that you cannot carry out any of the suggestions now is the time to say it. If you don't feel confident in the instructions or believe they won't work then this is potentially a real worry. Many CBC interventions fail at this stage because the necessary conditions were not present for a relationship of trust to develop between the owner and the counsellor. In my opinion, this is the key to the whole process.

## In conclusion

Cat behaviour counselling is complex and the best comprehensive advice needs a full history and behaviour assessment. The client therefore plays a pivotal role in this process – the more you can give, the more you will get out of the experience! ●

\*Cat Behaviour Counsellors use various titles including Certified Clinical Animal Behaviourist, Pet Behaviourist, Pet Behaviour Counsellor or Veterinary Behaviourist depending on their qualifications. This is not a regulated profession, so your veterinary surgeon will advise accordingly regarding choice of practitioner.