

Interview with a Cat Behaviourist & Groomer

Interview with Anita Kelsey by Honorary Researcher, Dr Marketa Zvelebil
at The Institute of Cancer Research

Anita Kelsey is a cat lover who started out grooming cats and seeing the way they behaved during grooming got interested in cat behaviour and cat problems. So after a long study she is a skilled cat “psychiatrist” as well as a cat groomer.

Hello Anita, as a scientist involved in the field of improvement of drugs in a number of diseases and an avid cat lover I am interested in how pets can improve the lives of people that are going through tough treatments. It has been shown, for example, that stroking cats can lower the blood pressure of many people. However, the animals have to be happy and healthy so that both human and animal comfort and care for each other. Therefore it is important to have people like you who visit cats at home to groom them, and very important that you can go and help the owner if their cat develops behaviour problems. As that can cause enormous amount of stress. I would like to hear your views about certain aspects of both your behaviourist and groomer hat on.



Firstly, though, how did you get involved with first grooming and then the whole difficult field of cat behaviourist? At first you are a musician?

Yes, I was a singer/songwriter for most of my working life. But a personal tragedy led me to re-think things. I didn't sing for 2 years and felt really lost so I started to think about what else made me happy. It was a no brainer really: cats ;-). I first set up a cat sitting business, and then I studied the field of grooming cats, which led to studying the behaviour of them. It's all grown very organically and the need is huge for all three areas. I do find that all three go together quite nicely.

What are three biggest things you would like to see changed connected to cat welfare?

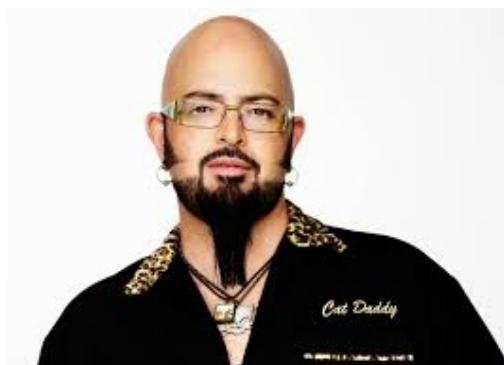
I'd def like to see de-clawing banned worldwide. In the UK the practise is illegal but in North America, for example, it's still commonly performed on cats to stop furniture being destroyed. I'd like cat owners to be educated more when they obtain a cat, especially those who keep a cat exclusively in-doors. I see too many homes with nothing considered to enrich their cats' environment and it is very upsetting and frustrating. The other thing I'd like to see is the banning of experiments on animals in general and this does include the cat. I believe, as a race, we are making headways towards funding companies who are trying to find alternatives. In Europe testing animals for make-up has now been made illegal. I'd like to say a forth, cats on the menu in places like Korea and China, but we can't preach to other countries about what meat they eat. We can just pray that more humane methods of killing are used.

Who has inspired you most on your journey and how much have they had an influence on your working philosophy?

*There have been several people who have inspired me. My grooming teacher, **Svetlana Broussava**, who came over to the UK from Russia. She taught me the gentle holistic approach to grooming. To listen to what the cat is telling you. No scruffing or rough handling to show who is boss. She is a huge inspiration also because she left a successful vet practice behind in Russia, through circumstances I won't go into, and came to the UK with nothing. From this she built up a hugely successful dog and cat grooming parlour and now runs the UK's best cat grooming school with cat welfare at the forefront of the training. Of course **Jackson Galaxy**, US cat behaviourist, also hugely inspires me. I learn something new every time he speaks and I love the fact that all of his learning has been from the ground up. No qualifications but real hands on learning. His approach is amazing. Finally I'd like to mention **Dr Sophie Yin** who teaches methods of low stress handling and training to vets, groomers and behaviourists. Her book is brilliant and her approach takes into account the natural behaviours of the animal and how it would be reacting to fear.*



Okay then the obvious question is: You have recently had the good fortune to interview Jackson Galaxy, one of the most famous behaviourist. What was it like and what is he like?



Jackson has a deep universal message to us all about animals, not just cats, and this comes across in everything he says and does and it's genuine. He's a huge inspiration to me and that's why I was so excited to talk to him. He was warm and friendly and very generous with his time. I was allotted 20 mins but we spoke for well over 30. I can die happy now lol

What do you think about the indoor/outdoor life discussion that is ongoing at the moment? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

Good question! This is the only thing Jackson and me differ slightly on. In the US its common that a cat is kept exclusively indoors which is why I think Jackson has hundreds and hundreds of behaviour cases. Shelters tell people to keep the cat indoors whereas over here a rescue centre won't let you have a cat unless it has outside access. When I first got my two Norwegian Forest cats I thought it was ok to keep them inside but the more I learned, and the more I watched them grow, I had a 180 degree turnaround on my viewpoint. Because I spent my money on two cats that are unusual in their looks I could not let them out as free roaming due to them being stolen. So I had to think of something quickly and I trained them to walk on a lead. This isn't ideal. They sleep a lot of the time, when we are not home, through boredom. I am sure they would much rather be outside exploring as and when they choose. So my views are that it is not natural to keep a cat indoors. It is cruel. I think it can work if you have an outside space devoted to a cat so they can go out and chase bugs, smell fresh air, and do things cat naturally love to do but keeping a cat in a small flat for the rest of its life no, I do not agree with that.



In treating behaviour problems, how often is the problem not the cat but the environment of the cat?

It's one of the biggest factors most definitely. That and the attitudes of its owner(s). A lot of cat carers have no clue as to what is required to keep their cat happy and stimulated. I find this really frustrating especially when I give advice that is then ignored.

What do you think about using medications for behaviour problems?

I think it can work in conjunction with environmental changes. Some cats are not normal in their behaviours and this may require medical intervention if it means the owner can continue to live with the cat. Everything should be tried first, away from medical intervention, but sometimes it's obvious that there's a problem in the brain which only medicine can manage for a workable long-term solution for owner and cat. I'm not convinced about homoeopathy, bach remedies, for humans or animals but I'm sure there are plenty of people out there who will swear by these methods.

Do you think that there are some problems or cats that cannot be helped?

No, Personally I believe all problems can be sorted sufficiently or managed. I recently saw a cat that was incontinent and this is a problem that needs to be managed. Either that or the cat has to be euthanized. Some cats need to be moved to different environments, or different owners, some need medication.

Every situation is different because all cats are different but, like Jackson, I believe every problem can be helped one way or another and a suitable solution found for all concerned.



Do you think that a behaviourist should always visit the cat and it's environment?

Yes. I know a lot of behaviourists also offer email or skype consultations as then they can offer assistance worldwide but there's nothing like seeing the cat in its home environment and seeing how owner and cat relate because every cat has a unique set of circumstances and personality. For instance, my incontinent cat: I needed to see him in his home to see the full extent of the issues to determine whether his behaviours were normal or not.



Why do you think that nowadays it seems that there are more behaviour problems in cats (and dogs)? Of are we just more aware of it?

I think you have hit the nail on the head. Veterinary practices are getting more training in behaviour issues rather than just focusing on the medical side of things and there has definitely been a surge in rescue centres/animal shelters becoming more involved in understanding natural behaviours of the animals in their care. Even the Mayhew Animal Home has a resident cat behaviourist. I also think there has been a surge in behaviour problems due to more humans treating their animals like children rather than animals that are sharing space with them.

Finally how do you marry your grooming business with the behaviour one? Do you sometimes start as a groomer and end up doing behaviour therapy?

I try to keep the two business's separate, as two different fees and two different work ethics are involved, but of course they cross over. Understanding cats' behaviours is essential on every groom and helps me get to the end of the groom with the least stress involved. Clients do pick my brains when I am grooming their cat and I'm happy to offer basic advice but I do let them know that any behaviour problems need thorough investigations and are never as black and white as answering a few questions whilst concentrating on something else. On a recent groom I failed to notice a stress signal that a cat was giving me. This is very unusual for me and because of this lapse of concentration I was badly bitten on the hand. I spent 5 days in hospital and had two operations. It's never the cat's fault. There is always a reason why a cat would react in this way and on this occasion the cat was fearful of being groomed. As a behaviourist I should have known this but no one is perfect and the cat taught me a very valuable lesson. Never stop listening to the cat!

Thank you Anita. For Further information or contact details visit the web sites below.

<http://www.catbehaviourist.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/catbehaviourist>

<http://catnipsfelineadvicepage.wordpress.com>

