

## Ahhhh...There's the rub...

*Lessons in the language of touch help owners and shelter volunteers speak fluent "bark" and "meow."*

In 1983, when I graduated from the Swedish Institute of Massage Therapy in New York City, my final paper was entitled, "Massage Therapy from a Feline Point of View." I compared human and feline anatomy and physiology and adapted traditional Swedish massage techniques for cats. During my research, I noticed a dramatic change in the behavior of Mr. Grey, a feral cat from the woods in upstate New York who was my "pioneer" in pet massage. As I paid more attention to how I was petting him, he paid more attention to me. He became affectionate, responsive and then downright demanding of my affection, and I knew it coincided with the massages.

Sixteen years later, at the Peninsula Humane Society outside San Francisco, where I go regularly to massage the cats, I met a terrified and timid four-year old male cat. Weighing slightly more than four and one-half pounds, he was one of 25 flea-bitten, under socialized and malnourished cats who had been rescued from the home of an animal collector. He hid so far back in his cage that he became almost invisible to the people who passed by him every day. The first time we met, it took a few minutes for me to gently pry his claws from the shelf. For the first week, he cowered and shook as I held him in a towel. I attempted massage, but even the slightest touch was too intense.

For the next few weeks, I patiently cradled this cat in my arms or held him securely on my lap and repeated gentle, soothing words. Gradually he began to accept being massaged with a soft bristle brush. Then, one quiet afternoon, I heard him purr for the first time.

Needless to say, I adopted him. Five months earlier, he was slated for euthanasia. Today, Bodacious luxuriates in every massage technique I try on him. Some of his old fears are still with him, but now he clearly desires affection and attention. What a tribute to the power of touch!

### **Medically speaking**

To some, the idea of massage for animals may seem frivolous. But the benefits of massage are clear, whoever the recipient. Physiologically, massage stimulates the body's nerves, muscles, circulatory system and lymphatic system. It enhances range of motion, increases the supply of oxygen and nutrients to muscle cells, relieves muscle spasms and helps to flush away toxic compounds, such as lactic acid, that cause pain. Massage has been used therapeutically to aid in healing after injury or surgery, ease chronic stiffness and reduce the heart rate.

At the University of Miami School of Medicine, Tiffany Field, Ph.D., established the first Touch Research Institute in 1992. Studies conducted at the Institute, which is devoted solely to the study of touch and its application in science and medicine, show that, among other benefits, massage can alleviate symptoms of depression and reduce stress hormones. Yet the benefits of massage are too often neglected in human psychology. It wasn't until years later that it was discovered that babies born in orphanages in the 1940s and '50s often died from not being held.

"Touch experiences underlie our emotional states," says Steven Lindsay, M.A., a dog trainer and animal behaviorist based in Philadelphia. Lindsay explains that massage stimulates production of endorphins (or opioids), which are connected to feelings of pain, grief, fear, joy, etc. "Touch is direct access to emotion," he says.

### **From people to pets**

What all this means to animals in shelters—as well as your animals at home—is of enormous value. "The relaxation response is the big issue, the ability of the dog just to settle down and relax.

If massage can do that consistently, it's a miracle," says Lindsay, who started using massage on dogs about 10 years ago to calm overzealous puppies.

He now sees it as a routine way to reduce stress in shelter animals, and he gives presentations to staff and volunteers in which massage is a component. Just three to five minutes of a systematic, quiet massage, he says, is extremely beneficial. Why? Because animals who get massaged regularly tend to get adopted quicker than those who don't receive the same TLC. At the Peninsula Humane Society, veterinarian Dr. Melissa Matthews notes that after receiving massages from volunteers, dogs are more personable during their "interview" sessions, and cats are often seen sitting at the front of their cages. "Massage isn't a luxury for our animals," she adds, "it's a necessity."

But it isn't just the animals who benefit. "It's a win-win situation for everyone," says Beth Ward, Director of Animal Care at the Peninsula Humane Society. "Both sides love the attention and affection, and volunteers know they've given a tremendous gift."

### **Tips on getting started**

First, find a willing animal companion and practice. Massage is easy to learn and takes only a few minutes. In fact, you probably already know a lot of the motions. Remember, it's the masseur's intent that makes massage different from just simple petting, and animals can sense a person's intent. Patience and persistence pay off. You may find some of these suggestions so subtle that you'll be tempted to shortcut around them, but it is precisely these subtleties that make massage work.

- 1.** Notice your own state of mind. Do you feel rushed? Frustrated? Angry? Take a few deep breaths and let outside concerns fall away. A few minutes of well-intentioned touch can replace a half-hour of petting, so focus on your companion's needs.
- 2.** Start with "voice massage." Repeat an endearing phrase over and over again in a soothing tone (or tune) to capture your animal's attention and prepare both of you for contact. The words aren't important—the tone of your voice is. I sing, "Who's the best boy in the whole wide world? It's you, Champer Damper, it's you." Have fun coming up with something of your own.
- 3.** As a courtesy to your animal, allow adequate time for the cat or dog, even a faithful family pet, to sniff, recognize and accept your extended hand before you actually touch him or her. Then, always begin your approach from the shoulders. Even with a small dog or a cat whom you know, never make first contact with the top of the head or the face, because they may perceive this as a threat.
- 4.** Don't rush. Of the four different massage "speeds" that can be used, most people don't use "slow motion" often enough. Stroke down your pet's back and count how long it takes. Then repeat the stroke in double the amount of time, so that a four-count stroke will now take eight counts. It may feel strange, but what seems excruciatingly slow to you may feel very appropriate for your pet.
- 5.** Use repetition. Repeat that same slow technique six times. It may seem boring to you, but it won't to your animal. Repetition establishes acceptance and familiarity, then relaxation.

**6.** If your dog refuses to relax, or wants to play, consider giving a few basic commands, such as “sit” and “down,” in a firm voice until your pet becomes receptive to the routine.

**7.** Massage is very intuitive. Trust that intuitive feeling. Feel your animal’s response. You’ll be relaxed, and so will your pet.

**8.** Look for friendly feedback. For cats, that means blinking, purring (sometimes), drooling, sleeping, self grooming or a relaxed look in the eyes. For dogs, it could be licking the lips, a relaxed body posture or a calm look in the eyes.

**9.** Get a massage yourself! This is the best way for you to understand the different strokes and their cumulative benefits.

**10.** Once you’ve gotten the hang of massage, volunteer your gift to others. Remember, everything you learn at home with your own animals can be put to good use at your local shelter.

Pet an animal, and you’ve made a friend for a day. Massage an animal, and you’ve made a friend for life.

*Maryjean Ballner, author of Cat Massage and producer of the video Your Cat Wants a Massage!, is a New York State Licensed Massage Therapist. She has conducted workshops on cat massage at humane societies in the San Francisco Bay Area and at The ASPCA.*

#### **For cats...**

1. Start with a few slow-motion caresses, using four fingers together and mild pressure. Feel the bony contours.
2. Follow around to the front for some “Breast Stroking.” See if your animal wants you to increase the speed.
3. Now hold the chest in your cupped hand. No movement is necessary. This works well for frightened animals.
4. Using two fingers, stroke under the chin for “Chin Ups.” Repeat caresses from the throat to the tip of the chin. Now, rub the tip of the chin in a circular motion. If the chin reaches skyward, the cat wants more – you’re cooking now!

#### **For dogs...**

Massaging the muscles of the head (1) and jaw (2) promotes a growing relaxation response. (3) Using the fingertips to apply a gentle circular stroke, while simultaneously kneading with the heel of the hand, produces a strong calming effect.

#### **Safety First**

- Never use force
- Never press on the animal’s stomach
- Never attempt to give a massage while under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- If you’re not in a good mood, wait until you are
- Don’t use oils, creams or lotions

- Never pull fur, ears, tail or whickers
- Don't massage an aggressive dog without professional help. When in doubt, use a muzzle.

### **For more information**

Pick up the videotape *You Cat Wants a Massage!* or find *Cat Massage*, a 128-page book with photographs illustrating 40 techniques, by Maryjean Ballmer, St. Martin's Press. To order, call toll-free 1-877-MEOW-MEOW, or visit [www.catmassage.com](http://www.catmassage.com).

Other books include *The Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training, Vol. I, Adaptation and Learning* by Steven R. Lindsay, Iowa State University Press, and *The Healing Touch*, Dr. Michael W. Fox, Newmarket Press.

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