



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor



Square cat, round house! **Vicky Halls** investigates...

Eva adopted a beautiful female cat from her local shelter, named her Misty, and for the first few weeks they enjoyed a blissful existence together. Then, as Eva reported when she called me recently, the relationship changed for no apparent reason and took on a new sinister dimension. Misty seemed to change from the angelic feline she had previously been to an unpredictable creature that bit Eva on a daily basis.

When I visited Eva shortly after that first phone call we had an opportunity to discuss Misty's behaviour at length. A visit to the veterinary surgery, during which Misty behaved impeccably, confirmed that she was healthy and not suffering from any pain or illness that could explain her aggressive outbursts. It was now my job to delve further into the finer details of her lifestyle and behaviour to see what clues I could find to explain her distressing attacks. Eva felt confused and betrayed; she loved Misty so much and yet her response in return was to reject Eva violently at every opportunity.

While Eva and I were deep in conversation I was also watching Misty out of the corner of my eye. She seemed oblivious to our presence but I did note that every time she entered the room or passed within Eva's line of vision there was a tickle or a quick word of acknowledgement from her owner.

The extended environment

I found out a great deal about Eva and Misty that day. Eva had lived on her own since her husband passed away. She had always loved cats and when her last ginger tom died several years ago she promised herself that, one day, she would have another cat. She had been so delighted when Misty had come into her life and was determined to be the perfect cat owner. She had read that it was good to allow cats the freedom to be outdoors so, after a

couple of weeks, she had opened the back door for Misty to explore. Coincidentally, it was shortly after this that Misty developed her alter-ego. I wasn't sure it was such a coincidence as I went outside and looked around the low-fenced garden that enabled me to see for some distance in both directions. Although this may be a slight exaggeration, there appeared to be cats everywhere! They were on shed roofs, fences, lawns, rockeries – some camouflaged and some blatantly flaunting their presence in a mildly sinister way. I can imagine the area was heaven for cat lovers but hell for cats. A pattern was emerging here...

On further investigation it was confirmed that an elderly gentleman was putting food out for stray cats four doors down and this had resulted in the formation of a sizeable colony of waifs, strays and opportunistic pets looking for an extra dinner. Eva also confirmed that many of the more severe bites occurred outside – when Eva bent to stroke Misty – or indoors shortly after Misty came in from the garden.

My thoughts were as follows: Misty was a cat who appreciated human contact and affection on her own terms and wasn't backwards in demonstrating her frustration when Eva constantly focused on her and touched her. Misty was also suffering greatly from the pressures of the cat population outside. She wanted to establish territory as a 'new cat on the block' but found herself in a state of permanent conflict between the desire to claim the right to roam and the desire to keep safe. Her adrenaline-fuelled state of readiness to deal with the ever-present threat of attack was easily triggered at its most extreme when Eva chose to touch her when she was outside or shortly afterwards. The stress and pressure of her environment had started to have a permanent impact on Misty's tolerance of contact from her highly focused and tactile owner.

There was a further complication. Eva was on medication for chronic illness and was immunosuppressed. Each bite wound was taking longer to heal and she was on her second course of antibiotics. The stress of dealing with the situation with Misty was also taking its toll as it exacerbated the symptoms of her illness, often leaving her unable to do anything but lie down for long periods in the day.

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the FAB's Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For further information regarding these please visit her website: www.vickyhalls.net Vicky also hosts a cat behaviour Facebook Group and you can join in the cat discussions by searching for 'Vicky Halls Cat Behaviour' from within Facebook.



What's for the best?

I had a dilemma as I wanted to make this work for Eva but I didn't want to compromise her health. Misty wasn't robust enough territorially to cope with the high cat population and this was impacting on her behaviour and reducing her already low frustration tolerance. I felt that Misty represented the ultimate definition of a 'square cat in a round house'. Drastic measures were required, starting with a frank and honest chat with Eva. I explained that Misty was struggling with the cat population outside and that, whatever programme of change I put in place, I could not guarantee that Eva wouldn't be hurt again in the future and I was worried about her health. I am pleased to say that Eva was equally honest in return and she agreed that she was disappointed that I couldn't turn Misty into the cuddly cat she had always wanted and needed. We talked at some length at that point about how Misty might feel about all this and how beneficial it would be for her to live somewhere else.

This is one of the hardest dilemmas that loving cat owners face. As the cat is a territorial species the environment it lives in is fundamental. The space available and the other cats sharing that space, together with the owner's interactive style, will dictate which elements of the cat's unique character and temperament is expressed and to what extent. Sometimes, with the best will and care in the world, 'square cats' find themselves in 'round houses' and no amount of shaving off the edges will make them fit. Over the next few weeks, after putting in a temporary safety programme that basically involved Eva only interacting with Misty on the cat's initiation, she bravely agreed that her health complications and Misty's inability to cope with the high population of cats meant it would be preferable all round for the two to part company. Eva had already been giving me little covert messages about another cat and how awful and lonely it would be without one and, when the time was right, I decided to address the question of the sequel to Misty. We both agreed that another cat, chosen wisely, would be a good idea but we disagreed on the timescale. Eva wanted one in and one out – a quick swap – and I felt that a short period without a cat would help Eva resolve her fear and expectation that she would be bitten. I had a horrible suspicion that her hesitant and anxious behaviour might provoke attacks from otherwise placid cats in response to a human behaving very strangely.

I had already made enquiries of a rehoming centre that I frequently used with a particular talent for finding homes for cats with special needs. Eva was adamant she wanted a part-exchange so, after careful discussion with the rehoming centre, she took Misty in and left with Suki.

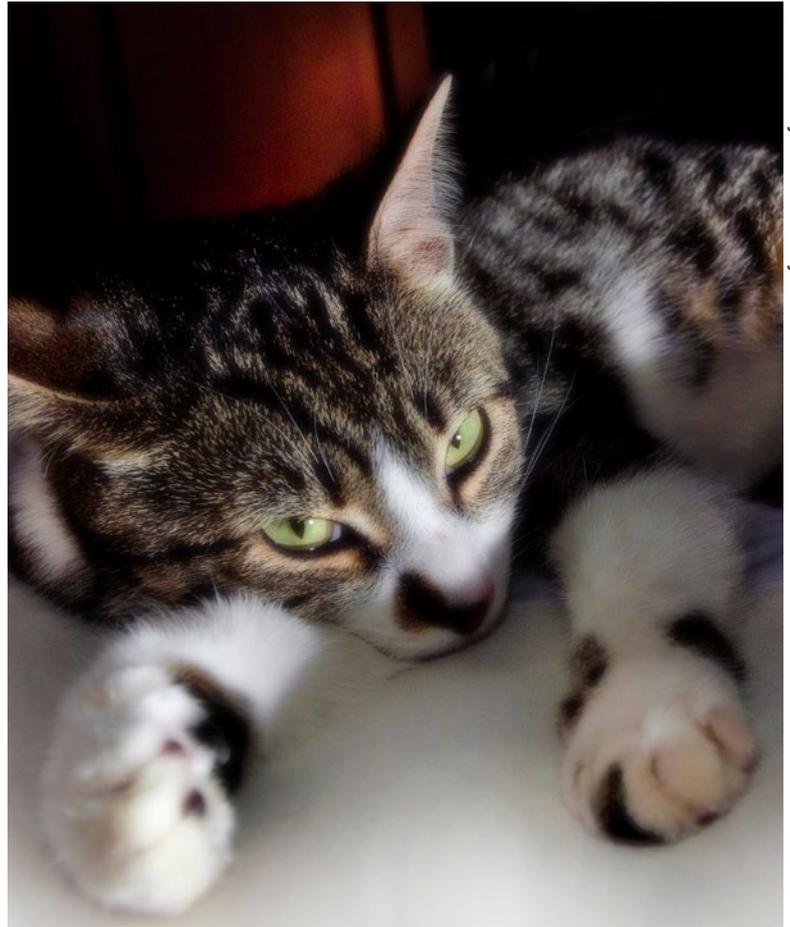


Photo: CP Library/Karl Brackenbury

A happy ending for all

Eight months later Eva and Suki are very much in love. Suki is five years old and takes no prisoners outside in the 'territory from hell'. She adores Eva and loves nothing more than fulfilling the brief of a lap cat extraordinaire. Eva took a little while to adjust to the fact that not all cats bite, as I suspected, but she coped with great bravery and determination and she now has exactly what she had wanted all along. Whenever I embark on this sort of solution to a cat behaviour problem I always make a point of monitoring the square cat and ensuring that the right square house is found. Only last week Misty's new owner, Jonathan, sent a lovely email and accompanying picture to the rehoming centre to forward to Eva and me. He said that Misty was gentle and loving, the perfect cat for him and he was so happy she had come into his life. The photograph showed Misty on her back with all four feet in the air, fast asleep on a luxurious raised cat bed placed strategically adjacent to a radiator. There were very few cats in the territory and Misty had spent many hours outside enjoying the spring sunshine. She fits at last. ●

This is an composite of cases where names have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the clients involved.