

Mindful Bites: Treat your cat to a bit of love

Design by Alev Sonmez

Text by Pieter Desmet

Our cats are getting fatter. The number of overweight cats in the Netherlands has risen from a quarter in the '90s to half nowadays. In other words, 50 per cent of all cats in the Netherlands is too fat, one in ten is even obese. Unsurprisingly, obesity is currently the main health issue among our pets. The most important cause is *overfeeding*—usually driven by affection, but with very unfortunate consequences for the cat. With **Mindful Bites**, designer Alev Sonmez introduces an alternative form for affectionate feeding in which love goes hand in hand with positive health.

Garfield's Bad Mood

A chubby cat is so very cute and cuddly, isn't it? Think of famous cartoon hero Garfield and the mysterious Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland. I can't imagine them without their round shapes: chubby cats, those are *fun* cats. However, for the cat that extra bit of fat is far from fun. Obesity causes severe health issues such as joint pain, early wear and shortness of breath. Fat cats are more prone to diabetes, osteoarthritis, high blood pressure, heart disease, and this in turn can lead to depression. Is obesity caused by a lack of knowledge



regarding nutritional needs? In her literature study, Alev discovered the exact opposite: there is an abundance of solid, scientifically supported recommendations for the prevention and treatment of nutrition-related diseases in pets. The core of the problem isn't the knowledge, but rather the *behaviour*. Knowledge about healthy feeding is only effective when the owner applies this knowledge in practice—that is, when the owner's awareness and behaviour isn't part of the problem.

Unhealthy Love

For his eating habits, the cat is largely dependent upon the owner, and in most cases, obesity is a direct result of overfeeding. Alev was surprised to discover that hardly any research has been dedicated to feeding habits. Therefore, she conducted her own research among 16 owners and their cats. As it turned out, feeding is one of the most important daily owner-cat interactions. The importance of this moment lies in the owner's emotional needs just as much as in the functional nutritional needs of the

cat. The owner shows his or her love or affection by giving a bit of extra food, and in return feels loved by the cat's 'affectionate' response. Alev formulated four emotional feeding needs:

Compensate

Feeding as a way of cheering up the cat, or of alleviating a feeling of guilt (for instance if the cat was left alone for too long).

Appreciate

Feeding as a way of rewarding the cat for good behaviour, to thank the cat for attention and to show affection.

Attract

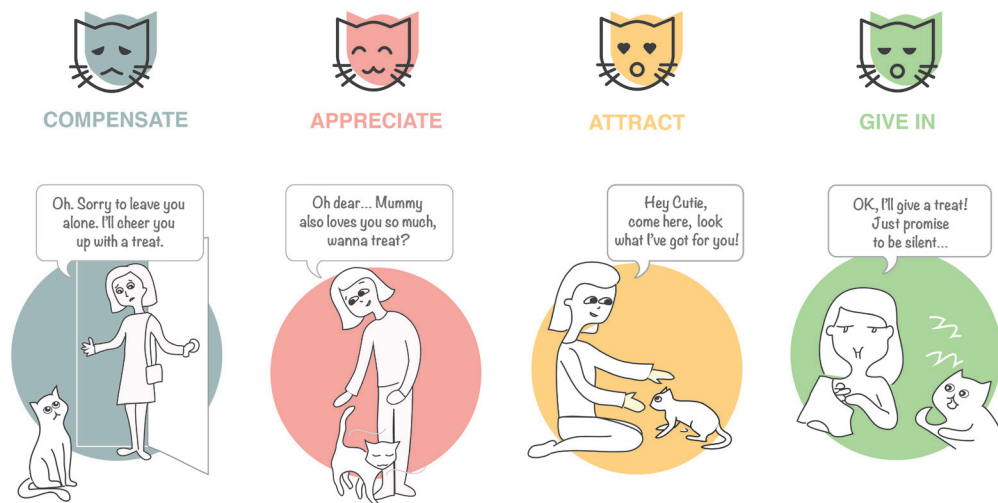
Feeding as a way of getting the cat's attention and to 'bribe' the cat to receive attention and affection.

Give in

Feeding as a way to keep the peace, when the cat is begging for a treat.



The Mindful Bites Package



Four Emotional Needs of the Owner

Overfeeding mainly occurs in giving snacks; a treat in addition to the regular meal. Those little extras give the owners the opportunity to satisfy their own emotional needs. This will lead to conditioned behaviour in the cat, who will start to beg for the treats, giving rise to an unhealthy pattern. Another factor that contributes to this issue is a widespread misconception of what the ideal weight of a cat should be. What people consider to be a healthy weight, might actually be overweight.

Mindful Bites; A Conscious Feeding Experience

Alev saw three design opportunities. The first is to enable the owner to satisfy his/her emotional needs with the regular meal. The second is to confront the owner with his/her own emotional needs that motivate the giving of these little extras. A third option is to make the owner recognise the difference between a healthy and unhealthy weight. For

each option, she designed a product that together form the Mindful Bites package: Mindful Treats, Mindful Meals and Mindful Strokes.

Mindful Treats

A box of snacks categorised according to the four emotional needs. By choosing a snack, you become more aware of your underlying motivation for offering your cat something extra. Additionally, the packaging offers tips about weight management that encourage further reflection about the feeding habits and the role of food in the relationship.

Mindful Meals

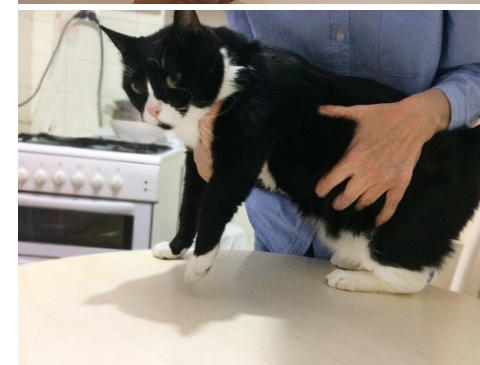
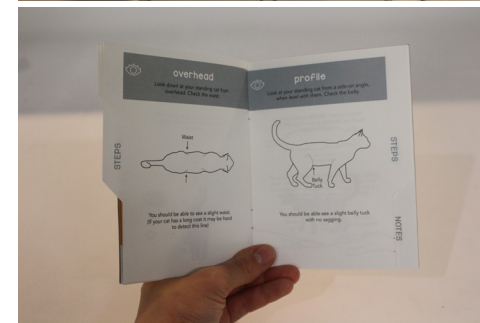
An important added value of giving a snack is that it brings about immediate interaction with the cat, which is missing in the regular meal feeding: where you would normally put the food in a bowl, you feed your cat this little extra by hand. Hand feeding is in-



Mindful Treats



Mindful Meals



Mindful Stroke

timate and interactive. Mindful Meals is a bowl that allows you to offer regular food in your hand. This means you can have a kind and fulfilling interaction with your cat without giving him snacks.

Mindful Strokes

This is a book that guides you when testing your cat's body condition. The book is based on the steps of the 'Physical Body Examination' method. It helps you to recognise and acknowledge obesity at an earlier stage.

Misha the Cat

Alev got the idea for her project when hearing her mother say: "When Misha asks for food and I refuse, that makes me feel so guilty. I can eat whenever I want, but he can't. Can you imagine?" That statement inspired her to explore the complex dilemma between knowing and acting. I believe this project is a great example of how designers can approach problems from a surprising angle. Obesity in cats was traditionally researched from a medical perspective, resulting in medical solutions and practical recommendations. By highlighting the owner's emotional needs, Alev was able to help cat lovers to develop a loving and healthy interaction with their cats with her Mindful Bites.



Alev Sonmez developed Mindful Bites in 2017 as a graduation project in the Delft Institute of Positive Design for the master's programme Design for Interaction. The project was initiated by her and was part of a broader study into designs for the interaction between people and animals. Supervisors were Pieter Desmet and Natalia Romero Herrera (TU Delft). Currently, Alev is conducting PhD research at the TU Delft into designing for positive mood regulation.

Colophon

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2019

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This article was originally written for the Dutch Journal of Positive Psychology (www.tijdschriftpositievepsychologie.nl).

All articles from the series can be downloaded at www.diopd.org

Reference

In communication, please refer to this publication as follows

Desmet, P.M.A. (2019). *The Mindful Bites: Treat your cat a bit of love*. Delft, Delft University of Technology.

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