

We Tried It: Massage Therapy for Cats

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All nine of my cat's lives were in seventh heaven as he experienced a session with a healing-touch practitioner while I was schooled in how important this work actually is.

By [Tara Cox](#) September 12, 2019

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Since adopting my cat, [Augustus Leopardo](#) (his friends call him Gus), a few years ago, I have fully embraced my crazy-cat-lady status—which by the way, thanks to the Internet and Instagram, is now a cool thing. Gus is no stranger to being spoiled. He's got cat trees, toys... Heck, he even got a taste of some fancy steak that most humans will never get the chance to try. So when the words *pet massage* came into my world, the thought bubble over my head filled with images of a therapist arriving with a tiny massage table and catnip incense and Gus gettingswaddled in a mini bathrobe with cucumber slices over his eyes and a towel wrapped turban-style atop his furry little head while someone gently rubbed his delicate kitty limbs to the tune of his blissful purr. *Sign us up!* I thought and then proceeded to book an at-home appointment with [Sarah Hauser, a certified animal Reiki and touch therapist in New York City](#).



Sarah and Gus

De-stressing is what therapeutic touch for pets is all about, but not in the sauna-and-deep-tissue way. What she does technically isn't even massage; Sarah's actually an animal emotional- and physical-guidance practitioner certified in a number of therapeutic modalities, which aren't as vigorous the classic rubbing and kneading of the body. She mostly works on four-legged friends with behavioral, mobility, or health issues but also spends a lot of time in shelters to socialize scared, temperamental animals deemed unadoptable and transform them into happy, well-adjusted pets. "I work with each animal differently, and the animal and my intuition guide me on how to proceed," Sarah says of her process. Her work doesn't end with pups and kitties; she's worked on iguanas, horses, goats, chickens, guinea pigs, rats, fish—even a monitor lizard named Milton!



Sarah's demonstrating TTouches with a paintbrush on her trusty stuffed-toy teaching cat.

Since cats don't travel well and are most comfortable on their own turf, Sarah came to my apartment for an in-home visit. She arrived and acquainted herself with Gus, letting him come to her for a sniff as she sat on the floor so she'd be at a height less intimidating to him. "I believe it is vital, when working with any animal, to see what they are ready for, rather than imposing our own needs and expectations on them," Sarah says.

Some of the techniques she uses are based on the Feldenkrais Method, a modality for humans that incorporates touch and subtle movements to influence the nervous system. The process helps the body and mind forget repetitive negative habits and creates new neural pathways to maximize awareness and potential in all aspects of life. Sarah began with TTouches (short for Tellington Touch), a method created by Linda Tellington-Jones, a former student of Moshe Feldenkrais who adapted his work to be used on animals (horses originally).

Sarah demonstrated a circular motion where she applied light pressure (no more than if you were to apply the touch on your own closed eyelid) to the back of Gus's head, moving his skin in a half- to one-inch tiny circle, one-and-a-quarter times. The movement was slowly and gently repeated where it was tolerated, such as the back, head, and cheeks. Sarah uses the back of the hand as it generates less heat and feels less intense to a skittish pet. These circular motions help the animal get used to being touched if it is fearful and help establish a rapport with the human as trust is built. Gus stood still and accepted the TTouches for a while. He

was comfortable enough to allow Sarah to use her fingertips with her hand facing down, but he was still curious about this new being in his space. He did his usual drive-by: Come in for a sniff to investigate while she grazed him with her fingers, then prance away to do his security checks on the rest of the apartment before looping back again for some more exploring of this new human and her gentle touches. Sarah went on to explain that for extremely fearful animals, she'll use a paintbrush or a back scratcher in place of her hands to get the animal used to her touches at a safe distance.



Gus getting used to Sarah



This cat's a bit of a ham.

At one point, when Gus was distracted by goings-on outside the window and headed over for a better look, Sarah pulled out a little stuffed-animal cat; with a proxy for the real thing, she could demonstrate more clearly the techniques that Gus was still too energetic to accept. She told me she got into touch therapy for animals when she rescued and adopted a feral cat she named Garbanzo. Garbanzo would get overstimulated and bite; his anxiety needed to be relieved so they could both live comfortably and happily. A former dancer, Sarah was familiar with using various holistic healing modalities (such as the Alexander Technique and kinesiology) to treat the injuries she had incurred. After adopting Garbanzo despite his fearful and defensive ways, Sarah was alerted to TTouch by her Feldenkrais teacher. Sarah began absorbing everything she could find online on TTouch and saw a difference in Garbanzo when she performed the various massages on him; biting was no longer his first reaction. "Most people would have called Garbanzo a bad cat, but I don't like to label cats that way," she says. "I want to look deeper and see what is beneath the behavior they are showing. How can I help this being to be more comfortable? How can I help a bond of trust to be possible?"

Once she saw the amazing results with Garbanzo, Sarah dove into this world more deeply and was officially trained in TTouch and later in Reiki (another therapy, more commonly used on humans, where energy is channeled from the practitioner to the subject, usually by holding hands on or just above the body to restore emotional and physical well-being within). She

also became certified to treat people and animals with Bach Flower Remedies, homeopathic flower essences that are used for emotional and pain issues; the Rescue Remedy is often recommended to pet owners for their anxious fur-babies.



"Hey Ma! This isn't so bad!"

As Gus grew comfortable with her presence, Sarah dragged her fingers in a zigzag motion across his back to get him used to being touched on a different part of his body, in a different way. He seemed into it for a bit, but was still on the move, investigating the contents of Sarah's bag, scratching at his cat tree, and checking on the window.

Sarah and I moved to the couch and Gus followed, so she showed me some ear massages. "There are acupuncture points in the ear which relate to digestion, respiration, and reproduction," Sarah says. "They are helpful for all kinds of stress on the body and mind." She recommends them for trips to the vet or other similar anxiety-filled situations. (Massaging these pressure points works on people, too, Sarah says: "TTouch practitioners have helped people who suffer from severe anxiety while flying!") Like the ear, the outside of the mouth is another great spot for TTouche—"but only if you are not in danger of being bitten!" says Sarah. This spot connects with the limbic system of the brain, which affects emotions. "It can be incredibly calming do to tiny little TTouche around that area," Sarah says. "Plus, another benefit to working near the mouth is it can help the animal get used to being touched around the mouth in a way that feels good, so it should be easier to pill them, brush their teeth, etc."



The Reiki starts to take effect.

Gus was more game for hanging out next to Sarah at this point so she began doing some Debono Moves, another modality created for animals by Feldenkrais practitioner Mary Debono that's more hands-on than the previously mentioned techniques. Sarah performed a Back Lift on Gus: She had her hands on either side of him and, with a light touch, was moving his body tissue up toward his spine and a little toward his head at the same time. After lifting, she paused and ever so slowly released the tissue back down. "Often, how I will experience it is that the animal is breathing into my hands," she says. "I felt Gus start to breathe more deeply and settle into my hands, as though we were becoming one with his breath and the movement." She did a few more lifts, moving her hand position slightly each time, relying on intuition to guide her. Gus stayed still, waiting for Sarah to repeat the move, so I'm guessing he enjoyed it. Now that she had his attention, Sarah was able to lay her hands

directly on Gus and keep them there, sharing her Reiki energy with him. I mistakenly thought this was when the Reiki portion of the visit began, but later Sarah revealed she had started it early in the session to "create a quiet space." Though I had originally thought Reiki energy could be shared only through touch, this isn't the case – the healer doesn't even need to be close to the subject! Sarah informed me that with animals she always starts at a comfortable distance, letting it decide how close she should get as the session progresses. Reiki can also be done remotely—she's even done sessions over the phone.



"Humans are awesome."

Sarah is a calming presence, and there was a peace and quiet in the apartment that we could all feel. (Yes, I'm speaking for my cat—I know he felt it as well.) Gus sat loaf-style, his body looking relaxed, but apartment noises and the birds outside the window still had his eyes darting like that famous old cat clock. After some time of lying with his head upright, he laid his head on the couch looking as if he was relaxing more into Sarah's touch. "I felt him absorbing the energy so deeply," Sarah points out. During the session, she and I chatted in hushed tones, which didn't seem to faze him. I could see something was really starting to happen when he flipped over onto his side, squirming his body and head into the couch with paws up in otter mode and belly splayed in a position that can't be mistaken for anything but comfort and security. The volume of his purr intensified. As Sarah points out, "It's interesting how these really subtle movements can affect the animal in such a deep way,"



Gus completely under Sarah's spell

At one point, Gus popped up, made a beeline for the kitchen sink, and waited patiently (his signal that he'd like to take a drink from the tap) as if, mid-massage, he was ready for his cucumber spa water. After taking a drink, he eagerly trotted back over to Sarah and assumed his "give me the Reiki" position. When he settled back in, I could swear his facial features softened into what looked like kitty bliss.

Sarah worked on him a bit more while I was astounded by Gus's laid-back, focused, and chill demeanor. It was as if magic had taken place, which really did testify the intensity of touch. Sarah told me that the modalities she uses can do miraculous things for our furry friends, such as stimulate additional movement in animals with mobility issues, stimulate appetite in ill animals, enhance cellular function, reduce pain, and ease anxiety. As she told me stories of her clients' success stories (fearful ferals that became happy house pets, terminal animals disinterested in food that began to eat again, and cats with litter box issues), I could then see and believe, by witnessing Gus' experience, the effect that this kind and animal-empathetic woman could have.



That's one blissed-out cat.

When Gus was finished, he got up and sat by the window, where he watched his beloved sparrows as they did their birdie thing on a nearby tree. After Sarah left my apartment, the good vibes stuck around. My always-sweet Gus was super snuggly and relaxed; he ate his dinner heartily, and later in the evening, he sat close to me on the couch as we Netflixed together. Seeing his tranquility, I could only imagine the good things that Sarah's presence could accomplish with a difficult animal over time. My thoughts turned to all the fearful, lonely, and unwanted cats sitting in shelter cages that very evening, and suddenly, I felt a little better knowing that Sarah is out there to help them.



Gus' tranquility lasted all evening.

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