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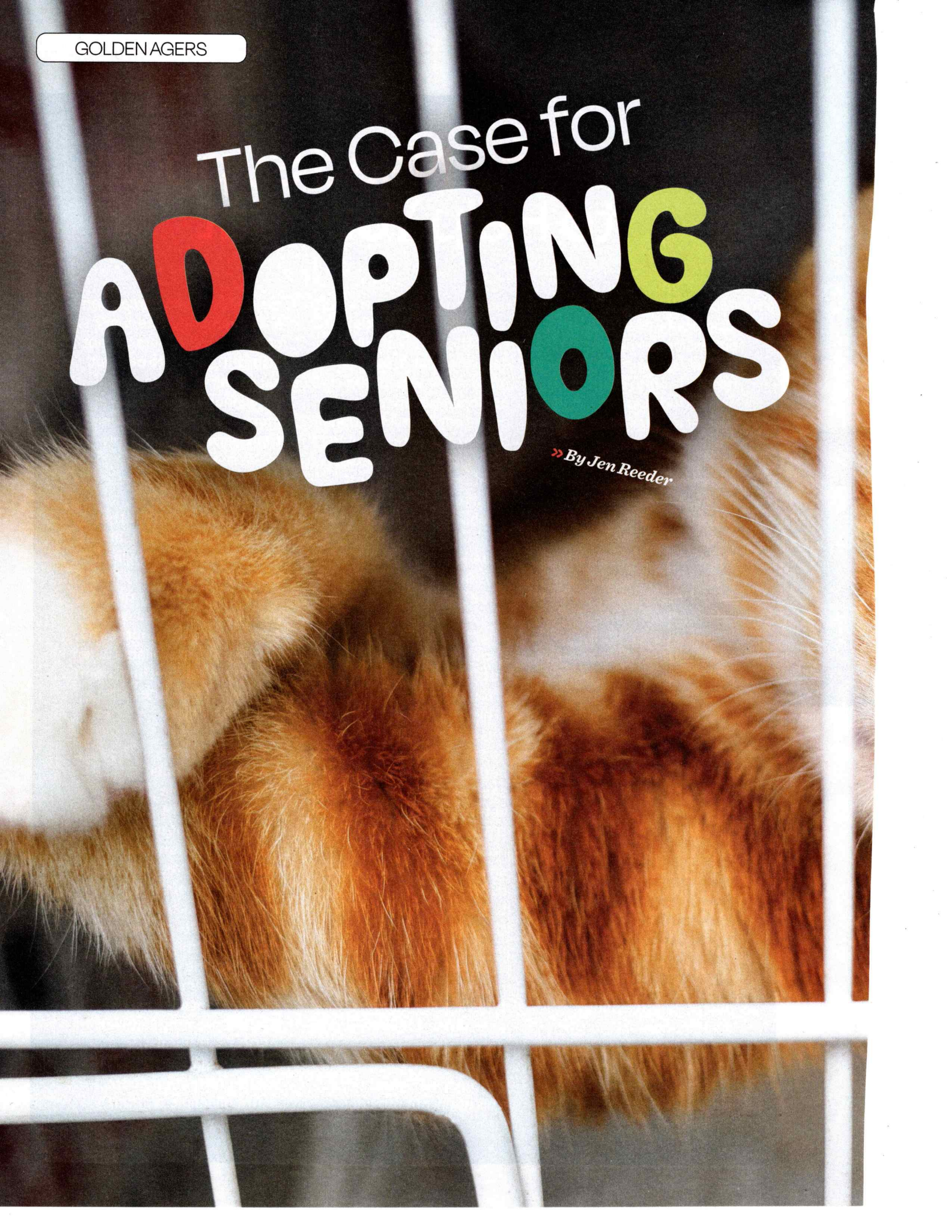
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NEW THERAPIES FOR STRESSED-OUT FELINES

GOLDENAGERS

The Case for ADOPTING SENIORS

» *By Jen Reeder*





An older cat can end up in a shelter after his senior owner dies.

THEY ARE THE LAST TO BE ADOPTED AT SHELTERS, BUT THOSE WHO BRING THEM HOME ARE OFTEN RICHLY REWARDED.

Over a decade ago, Veronica Iocona was scrolling through Facebook when she read a post about Zoey, an 18-year-old cat who landed in a nearby shelter after her owner died. The New Jersey resident already had three cats, so it didn't make sense to adopt another one. But she couldn't stop thinking about Zoey.

When she called the animal shelter to ask if anyone was planning to adopt Zoey, she heard, "Nobody wants to adopt a senior cat."

So Iocona adopted Zoey, who lived happily for nearly four more years.

"She was an amazing cat," Iocona says. "There's something about the bond with an old cat. They are very grateful. They are loving. It's a deeper connection. It just changes you ... I never adopted another young cat after that."

Iocona went on to create the nonprofit Senior Cat Action Network. Though cats are generally considered "senior" around age 10 by the veterinary community, Iocona's

nonprofit focuses on “super seniors” ages 15 and up. The nonprofit gives grants to rescue organizations to pull at-risk older cats out of shelters and give them medical care.

THE PLIGHT OF SENIORS

“Senior cats are often overlooked because most people are looking for a young kitten,” Iocona says.

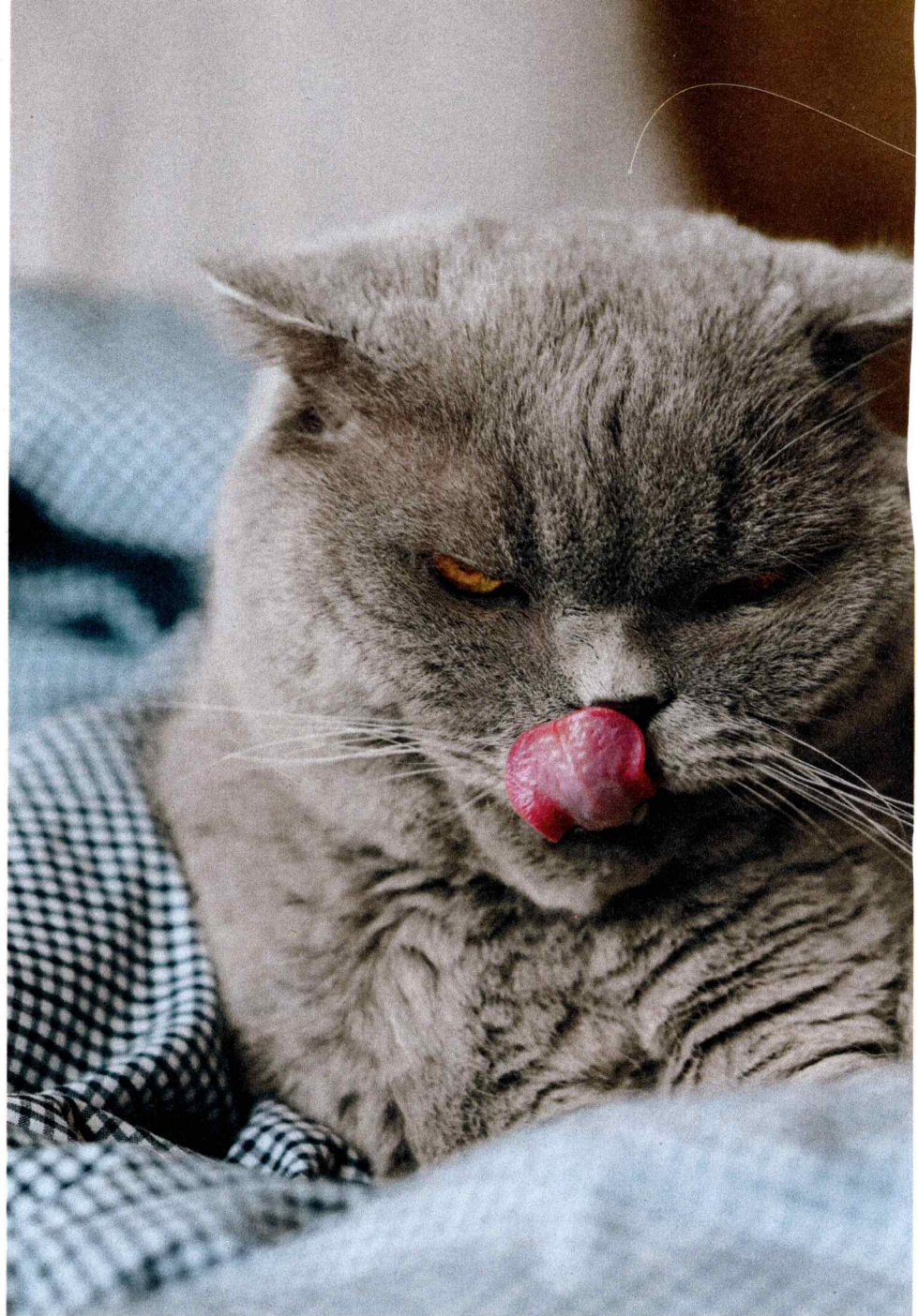
She often hears concerns that adopting a senior cat would be hard emotionally because they won’t live as long as a kitten. However, she notes that with a beloved animal, there’s never enough time.

“You could have had 20 years together, but every person says the same thing: ‘I wish there was more time,’” she explains. “We always wish it was longer. Most of these senior cats have been loved—they’ve been in a home—and they just need another chance for whatever reason.”

Millions of cats are entering animal shelters across America, so fostering and adopting cats of any age saves lives. But adopting senior cats is particularly critical because they are at higher risk for not having a “live outcome,” according to Stephanie Filer, executive director of Shelter Animals Count, a nonprofit that maintains a database of U.S. sheltering statistics.

“When a shelter is full and they’re having to make that agonizing decision to euthanize an animal, it’s three times more likely that it will be a senior cat than a cat of any other age,” she says, adding that Hurricanes Helene and Milton have put additional strain on the shelter crisis nationwide.

Filer has loved caring for her own cats through their senior years. When she worked at a shelter, she also enjoyed fostering senior cats in her office.



“I loved it because they wouldn’t be on my desk and my paperwork and causing a ruckus,” she recalls. “They would literally just lay in my lap all day. It was awesome. There really are a lot of benefits to seniors.”

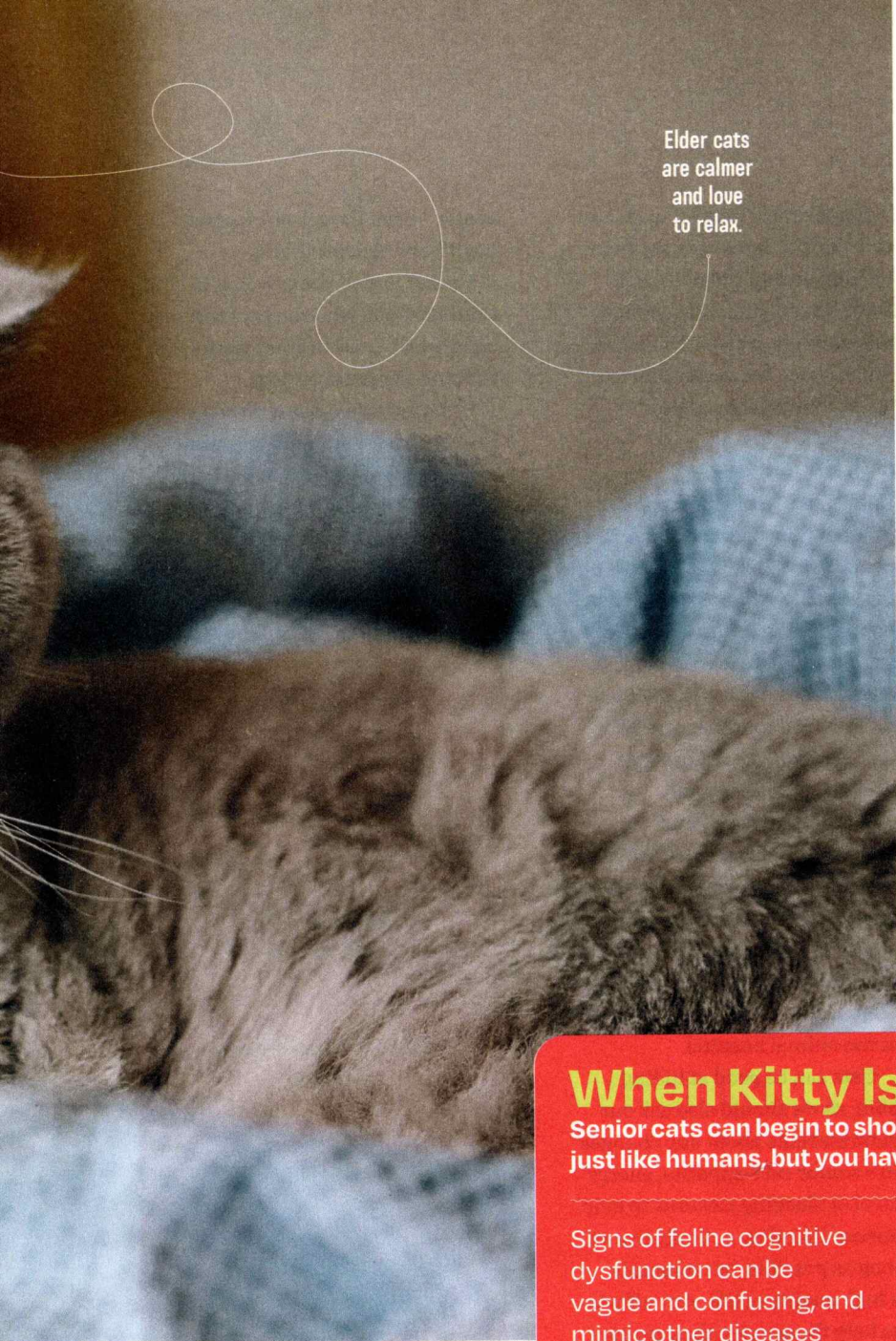
THE BENEFITS

Michele Hoffman, founder and president of Milo’s Sanctuary in Southern California, wholeheartedly agrees. Her nonprofit specializes in rescuing and rehoming seniors and cats with special needs.

“If you want a cat that’s just going to hang out with you and sleep with you and cuddle with you, get a senior,” she says.

Adopting a senior feline offers myriad benefits, according to Hoffman. For starters, unlike kittens or younger cats, “They know their manners.” They’re typically litter box-trained and don’t have bad habits like jumping onto countertops or scratching up furniture.

Their personalities have solidified, so adopters know what to expect.



Elder cats
are calmer
and love
to relax.

“When you yourself are older—like, I’m 60—consider adopting an older cat,” says Hoffman. “You have to consider that if you adopt a kitten, that kitten may outlive you.”

In fact, Milo’s Sanctuary often takes in senior cats whose owners die—and surviving family members take the pets to a shelter—where the cat is suddenly stressed, confused and at risk of being euthanized.

This leads Hoffman to two important conclusions: **1/ Senior humans should provide for their pets in a will, so there’s someone or funds to take care of them and they don’t end up unprotected in a kill shelter.** **2/ Senior humans looking to take on a feline should adopt senior cats whenever possible.**

“Except in certain circumstances, we do not like to adopt a cat younger than 8 to anyone who is in their late 60s (or older),” she notes.

When Kitty Is Confused

Senior cats can begin to show signs of cognitive decline, just like humans, but you have to know what to look out for.

Signs of feline cognitive dysfunction can be vague and confusing, and mimic other diseases and conditions. Look for:

1/ DISORIENTATION

Wanders aimlessly; acts lost and confused; may not recognize family members or other familiar people or places; gets “stuck” in corners or lost in the house.

2/ INTERACTION CHANGES

No longer greets family members; dislikes or avoids petting; not as interested

in getting attention; interaction changes with other pets.

3/ SLEEP CHANGES

Is awake and active at night; sleep cycles are disrupted or reversed.

4/ HOUSE-TRAINING IS FORGOTTEN

Can no longer use the litter box.

5/ ANXIETY OR COMPULSIVE BEHAVIORS

Tremors, yowling and crying; repetitive pacing; licking.

While they’re mellower than young cats, they often still like to play—just not for as long.

Hoffman feels senior cats are ideal pets for older people since they are much less likely to scratch thinning skin, and because of their calm demeanors.

THE QUESTION OF AGE

Cats can live to be over 20 years old. (Creme Puff, who holds the Guinness World Record for “oldest cat ever,” lived for 38 years and three days.)

Fostering cats is a prime option for seniors who aren't ready to adopt. "The Impact of Cat Fostering on Older Adult Well-Being and Loneliness: A Feasibility Study" found that fostering shelter cats decreased loneliness and increased mental health scores in people over 60.

Hoffman fervently believes people of any age will benefit from the love a senior cat will bring to their home.

"The experience of having a senior cat will absolutely change your life. I love them so much," she says. "And what better gift to give an older cat than a safe, peaceful place to live out their days."

ELDER CARE

The key to caring for a senior cat is helping them age gracefully and with dignity, according to Mikel Maria Delgado, Ph.D., a certified applied animal behaviorist and owner of the cat consultation business Feline Minds.

One important consideration is making sure litter boxes are easy for senior cats to use.

"I don't ever recommend top-entry litter boxes, but especially for senior cats, it's going to present a lot of challenges," she notes. "So, I recommend a large, open litter box with low-sided entry."

Make sure older cats have easy access to food, water and—again—litter boxes. Older cats with health issues such as kidney disease and hyperthyroidism will need to urinate more frequently, so place a litter box on every floor of your home.

Delgado also recommends padded bedding to help relieve stiff joints. Since senior cats lose muscle conditioning as they age—and because cats prefer warmer temperatures than humans—she notes that heated beds will make them more comfortable.

Seniors also may jump less due to arthritis. Since cats enjoy being up high to help them feel safe, Delgado recommends buying ramps or pet steps without too much space between them to boost their quality of life.

HEALTHY AGING

"I think it's really important to point out that aging is not a disease per se," says Delgado. "People tend to normalize a lot of things that happen to their cats when they get old, like, 'He just can't move around as well because he's old' or 'He's lethargic because he's old.' But in fact, a lot of these things are treatable and preventable conditions."

To help catch any medical issues and intervene early, she advises cat owners to record videos of their senior cats moving around at home to share with veterinarians, since they might freeze or act differently at the animal hospital.

Cats can be good at hiding pain, so we should also ask our veterinarians about any changes in a senior cat's appetite, energy level or sleeping patterns to help ensure that they not only live as long as possible, but maintain a high quality of life. Any efforts to help them enjoy their senior years will be worthwhile.

"I like to call senior cats 'raisins' because they get smaller and sweeter every year," Delgado says.

This past summer, California resident Meghan Rother was searching the adoption website petfinder.com for a rare cat breed—Toyger—and was surprised to find a 10-year-old Toyger named Nala available for adoption in Utah. She learned that Nala had spent 10 years with a family before they dumped her at a shelter because they didn't want to take care of a

senior—even though she had no health or behavior issues.

Rother is glad she traveled to Utah to adopt Nala, who she says is sweet, cuddly and loves to greet visitors by rubbing against their legs.

"I really lucked out with Nala," Rother says. "I am fully prepared to take care of her and make her happy and comfortable for as long as she wants to be here with me. Cats have unconditional love for you, and I feel that love needs to be returned to them." #

LINKS FOR MORE INFORMATION

SENIOR CAT ACTION NETWORK
seniorcatnetwork.org

SHELTER ANIMALS COUNT
shelteranimalscount.org

MILO'S SANCTUARY
milossanctuary.org

GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS "OLDEST CAT EVER"
guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/oldest-cat-ever

"THE IMPACT OF CAT FOSTERING ON OLDER ADULT WELL-BEING AND LONELINESS: A FEASIBILITY STUDY"
pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37738674/

FELINE MINDS
felineminds.com

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