Why cats can't resist a cardboard box: Animal behavior expert reveals how small containers help them feel secure when faced with the 'possible danger of wide open space'

- Instead of being exposed, cats prefer to huddle in small, clearly delineated areas
- Experts say it's much like being swaddled, close contact may release endorphins
- This causes them pleasure and reduces stress, helping them feel more secure
- Even 'virtual box' made of tape, as with 'Cat Square' challenge, may give comfort

By NICHOLAS DODMAN FOR THE CONVERSATION
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Twitter's been on fire with people amazed by cats that seem compelled to park themselves in squares of tape marked out on the floor.

These felines appear powerless to resist the call of the #CatSquare.

This social media fascination is a variation on a question I heard over and over as a panelist on Animal Planet's 'America's Cutest Pets' series.

I was asked to watch video after video of cats climbing into cardboard boxes, suitcases, sinks, plastic storage bins, cupboards and even wide-necked flower vases.
'That's so cute ... but why do you think she does that?' was always the question. It was as if each climbing or squeezing incident had a completely different explanation.

It did not. It's just a fact of life that cats like to squeeze into small spaces where they feel much safer and more secure.

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According to Dodman, the close contact with the box's interior likely endorphins – nature's own morphine-like substances – causing pleasure and reducing stress for cats.

Instead of being exposed to the clamor and possible danger of wide open spaces, cats prefer to huddle in smaller, more clearly delineated areas.

When young, they used to snuggle with their mom and litter mates, feeling the warmth and soothing contact.

Think of it as a kind of swaddling behavior. The close contact with the box's interior, we believe, releases endorphins – nature's own morphine-like substances – causing pleasure and reducing stress.

Along with Temple Grandin, I researched the comforting effect of 'lateral side pressure.'

We found that the drug naltrexone, which counteracts endorphins, reversed the soporic effect of gentle squeezing of pigs. Hugs, anyone?

Also remember that cats make nests – small, discrete areas where mother cats give birth and provide sanctuary for their kittens.

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The expert says it's just a fact of life that cats like to squeeze into small spaces where they feel much safer and more secure. This is likely even the case with the so-called 'virtual box,' when cat owners make a square on the floor using tape.

Owner tricks their cat into sitting inside a taped square

Note that no behavior is entirely unique to any one particular sex, be they neutered or not.

Small spaces are in cats' behavioral repertoire and are generally good (except for the cat carrier, of course, which has negative connotations – like car rides or a visit to the vet).

One variation on this theme occurs when the box is so shallow that it does not provide all the creature comforts it might.

Or then again, the box may have no walls at all but simply be a representation of a box – say a taped-in square on the ground.
This virtual box is not as good as the real thing but is at least a representation of what might be – if only there was a real square box to nestle in.

Small spaces are in cats’ behavioral repertoire and are generally good (except for the cat carrier, of course, which has negative connotations – like car rides or a visit to the vet). File photo

**DO CATS RULE THE HOUSEHOLD? STUDY SHOWS THEY BULLY DOGS**

In a study of homes with both pets, more than half of owners say their cat has lashed out threateningly at their dog.

Yet fewer than one in five have seen their dog menace their cat.

Some 56.5 per cent said their cat had threatened their dog, compared with 18 per cent whose dog had threatened the cat.

And although cats are typically smaller than dogs, they still manage to inflict injury on their domestic rivals. Almost a tenth of owners reported their cat had injured the dog, but fewer than 1 per cent said their dog had harmed the cat.

The findings come from a study of almost 750 owners, who overwhelmingly believe cat is king.

While dogs and cats can live together amicably, they said, it is rarely a ‘close relationship’ – and whether they get on at all is mainly up to the cat. Cats that are frequently uncomfortable around dogs were less likely to form an amicable relationship, they added.

Study co-author Dr Sophie Hall, of the School of Life Sciences at the University of Lincoln, said: ‘On the face of it, these results suggest that the cat is the kingpin in a household with dogs. They are the princess and the dog is lower down in the hierarchy.'
‘It may be that cats’ threatening acts are more obvious to owners, as they hiss or strike out with their paws at a dog.

‘But it may also be the case that cats are less domesticated in their behaviours. It is important to note that these findings are the owners’ perceptions of their pets’ relationships, but it seems that the cat has to be happy and content, rather than the dog, for them to live happily together.’

The study, published in the Journal of Veterinary Behaviour, said that cats and dogs may get along better if the cat is younger when they begin sharing a space.

This virtual box may provide some misplaced sense of security and psychosomatic comfort.

The cats-in-boxes issue was put to the test by Dutch researchers who gave shelter cats boxes as retreats.

According to the study, cats with boxes adapted to their new environment more quickly compared to a control group without boxes: The conclusion was that the cats with boxes were less stressed because they had a cardboard hidey-hole to hunker down in.

Instead of being exposed to the clamor and possible danger of wide open spaces, cats prefer to huddle in smaller, more clearly delineated areas. When young, they used to snuggle with their mom and litter mates, feeling the warmth and contact, like a kind of swaddling behavior.
Let this be a lesson to all cat people – cats need boxes or other vessels for environmental enrichment purposes.

Hidey-holes in elevated locations are even better: Being high up provides security and a bird’s-eye view of the world, so to speak.

Without a real box, a square on the ground may be the next best thing for a cat, though it’s a poor substitute for the real thing.

Whether a shoe box, shopping bag or a square on the ground, it probably gives a cat a sense of security that open space just can’t provide.

Cat has a fight with his tail but doesn’t move from his box!

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