In 2014 American College of Veterinary Behaviorists authored *Decoding Your Dog*. Since the book was my idea, I am well aware of what motivated that book, and it was twofold. At that time, people (and I include veterinary professionals) were buying into dog trainer Cesar Millan’s antiquated dominance-based and aversive approaches. Also, most pet parents had no clue veterinary behaviorists even existed; a part of my goal was to create awareness that this specialty is available as an option for pet parents.

Anyone and everyone was calling themselves behaviorists, still problem in the dog training world, arguably that’s even more an issue in the world of cats. It took long enough, but now *Decoding Your Cat* is out.

There are self-proclaimed cat behaviorists with zero props. Others literally may depend on reading tea leaves or checking cat horoscopes to solve problems. It’s not unusual for the “expert” to be the dude re-stocking pet food at the pet store.

“Of course, the advice we offer is a bit more scientific than tea leaves, but it’s also practical advice,” says lead co-editor Megan Herron, DVM, DACVB.

Like *Decoding Your Dog*, the feline version is indeed based on science but written for cat parents, from beginners to those who have lived with multiple cats for their entire lives.

There are a myriad of goals, which range from busting myths—which seem never ending in the cat world—and ultimately to maintain the human-animal bond.

“Cats wave a flag, there’s something wrong,” says one of the book’s contributors Amy Pike, DVM, DACVB, CABC.

“Well that is the cat’s perspective, they’re waving the flag. Cat parents may misinterpret or may even be unaware the cat is waving that flag. For example, they often maintain the cat is angry at the them or being spiteful when really what’s wrong is a medical problem.”

Herron agrees, “Every day when I was in general practice, people would come in and say ‘give me Prozac.’ And it turned out that we mostly found a medical explanation.

“Domestic cats physically haven’t changed a whole lot,” adds Herron. “So that means the behavioral repertoire is quite similar too. A strong hunting instinct, a desire to scratch and climb all over things and to perhaps, to do anything to feel safe. Perfectly normal behaviors for cats, but problematic for some families. When it comes to cats, our (clients) expectations are too often not what cats truly are.”

Of course, those expectations, however unrealistic, and that fact that cats don’t bark or require walks, per se, are reasons they’re more popular then dogs. “We don’t write about damaging cat training, as we did damaging dog training (in *Decoding Your Dog*),” says and laughs contributing author Julia Albright, DVM, DACVB, associate professor veterinary behavior at University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine, Knoxville. “While cats are way more self-sufficient than dogs, we’re often not fair to cats, not giving them what they need.”

Albright is referring to enrichment. There’s an entire chapter on enrichment, but there’s mention of it in every chapter.

“Enrichment should no longer be considered a nice option for clients of indoor cats,” says Albright. I actually prescribe enrichment all the time. I have a handout; I circle what’s right for that individual cat. We talk about what individual client can do and meet them where they are at. I actually tell clients to set times and have reminders to ensure that they do it. I talk about how cats can be taught to play fetch; I think there should seriously be an equivalent of canine nose work for cats. I have moose scent and put that on a paper towel.”

Pike adds, “Technicians (and nurses) have so much of a place in when it comes to communication and education—and it’s worth the time investment to address, in-person, or via telehealth. Maybe have
the technician teach the (clients’) kids. The favorite thing for our 12-year daughter and for our cat, is to enjoy a stroller ride around the neighborhood. Or hiding the Hunting Feeder (a feeding device) for the cat to seek and then manipulate to get food from.”

Enrichment is about meeting a cats’ hard-wired needs. Albright brings up a new area of study, “Enrichment releases the neuro chemical brain derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF).” At least that’s the case in rodents, humans and limited studies in dogs. BDNF serves as a sort of natural anti-depressant.

Herron agrees and add that she doesn’t believe that “selling” cat parents on the necessity of an enriched environment is as challenging as some profess. Perhaps, there can be a designated technician (nurse) in the practice who is the enrichment king or queen—and using telemedicine or a phone consultation—can offer creative ideas which are suitable for that family.

Another important objective consistent throughout the book is help clients be more aware than a change in behavior may be a result of a medical issue. Herron says, “Clients want a magic pill which doesn’t exist. And because the Internet says the problem is behavioral, it must be. So they add litter boxes for the cat with kidney disease, that’s fine except that the cat still has kidney disease.”

So many clients are embarrassed to even bring up a behavior problem, or they don’t think it’s important or don’t think a veterinarian would have any interest in a behavior problem. “I suggest private practitioners always ask, not if there’s a behavior problem, but if there’s been any change your cat’s behavior,” says Pike. “Sometimes people may not even think about it until you ask. Or they may think a change, like an older cat no longer jumping on a counter is to be expected. Of course, that tells us the cat may be in pain, right? And we can do something for that cat.”

“I’m so glad that cats are finally receiving attention they deserve—and hope Decoding Your Cat clears up the long list of misconceptions and misunderstandings people have about cats,” Albright adds.

Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB and Carlo Siracusa, DVM, PhD, DECAWBM also served as co-editors, and I authored the introduction to Decoding Your Cat.