

It therefore came as a great surprise when our attempts at introducing him to his own cat flap seemed anything but easy. In the end we decided that maybe he needed a little gentle persuasion – after all, up until this point he'd had his own personal doorman/woman available to open the door for him. The

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answer came in the form of tasty bits of chicken dangled either side of the cat flap. This 'training' went on for a few weeks, during which time he was enjoying lots of tasty chicken and we were both experiencing backache from spending too much time on all fours peering through the flap. We were almost at the point of giving up when I looked out of the bedroom window one day and, much to my surprise, saw Dougie whizzing through the cat flap like a missile to try and catch a bird in the back garden. It would appear he had fooled us both and was simply enjoying tucking into his daily treats.

As the years rolled by, he inevitably began to slow down; he stopped climbing on the garage roof and tightrope walking along the garden fence. He spent more time sitting in his favourite part of the garden, watching the birds going about their business without attempting to chase them. We noticed too that his back legs were stiff and he sometimes struggled to get through the cat flap. However, he soon worked out that if he tapped on it with his paw for a while someone would always come to open the door for him.

It's just over two years ago now since our darling Dougie passed away, but he's always in our thoughts and will never be forgotten. I know he will be waiting for us at 'Rainbow Bridge' – I just hope you don't have to fit through a cat flap to get there! ■

It happened to me...

Cat therapy

Pam Mason ponders on the healing powers of our feline companions.

Alternative therapies are very popular among cat lovers, but has anyone ever thought of using cats themselves as a complementary therapy? Careful study of my two cats has made me think that there may be a whole new science here. I have decided to call it 'Feliopathy': the natural healing power of the cat, harnessed to bring health and tranquillity to the human race.

This therapy takes various forms. Honey, the younger of my two, a sweet-natured tiger-striped tabby cat, specializes in massage. She uses her paws to knead the muscles in the upper arm, or sometimes the chest. This is very relaxing and soothing. There may be a slight prickling sensation, but this is purely due to pain leaving the body – absolutely nothing to do with her using her claws when she gets over-excited. An excellent way to help you drop off when you can't sleep. Cynics might argue that I wouldn't have trouble sleeping if she didn't keep waking me up for a cuddle, but who am I to challenge the ancient wisdom of cats? If she senses I need a massage she will come running, whether it's half-six in the evening or twenty-past-four on a freezing cold morning. She is always on call, dedicated professional that she is.

Tiger, my 12-year-old boy – another tabby, but who's less tiger-striped than Honey – has two different treatments to offer. Scientists have speculated that the frequency of the cat's purr aids in healing injuries and pain relief. Tiger is a compulsive purrer and laying my hand on his back while he is purring certainly brings relief from the pains I get in my hands sometimes.

Cynics (them again!) would say that I only get pains in my hands



because he likes to bite them so much. This is not true. What Tiger is practicing here is a form of acupressure – pressing his fangs into the acupuncture points in my hands to relieve pain. Offer a hand to him and he can, with a kind of sixth sense, tell whether or not his services are needed. They nearly always are. He is an absolutely tireless healer: he uses his acupressure skills almost every time anyone gets close enough.

I have, however, experienced some teething troubles (a pun Tiger would appreciate) with offering these services to other people. Whenever the doorbell rings, Honey hides under the bed, often for several hours, which would make patient-therapist relations rather tense. No one, after all, wants their doctor to run away from them in terror. Tiger has no problem approaching people: he is a very confident cat and will stroll up to anyone. But if you try to touch him when he doesn't feel like it (and it has to be said, he nearly always doesn't feel like it) he will scratch. A therapist who begins treatment by beating you up is not likely to inspire confidence. Insurance premiums could be large.

But it's a beautiful idea in theory. Perhaps I just need to retrain the cats: how hard can that be? Meanwhile, I am also thinking of starting up a religion based around the worship of cats. But I have a feeling someone got there before me... ■

True cat tales

The Dougie days

Jill Stanton-Huxton remembers a little ginger kitten with a huge personality.

It was love at first sight. He was the only ginger kitten in a litter of tabbies and he was simply adorable. He sprang out of the barn like 'Tigger' the tiger, jumping and leaping across the farmyard, stalking and pouncing on his siblings. My husband and I looked at each other and smiled – he was the one for us. It was as easy as that.

A few weeks later, when the big day arrived for us to collect 'Dougie', we were both excited and a little nervous. We'd had cats before when we were growing up, but this was the first one we'd had that was really 'ours' and not the 'family cat'.

When we arrived at the farm to collect him it was a beautiful spring morning and the sun was shining. At first we couldn't see him – the other kittens were happily playing in the sunshine and being watched over by their mum. Then all of a sudden he darted from behind an old tractor, whizzed across the yard and stopped abruptly at our feet. I like to think that this was his way of saying he was ready to start his 'adventure of a lifetime' and we were the ones he'd chosen to join him.

He soon settled into his new home, and it didn't take very long before he was showing us just how naughty he really was. It was only a matter of days before we began to discover bits of chewed-up wallpaper scattered around the living room carpet. And it wasn't long before I caught him busily 'wallpaper stripping' when I arrived home early from work one day.

Unfortunately, I'd forgotten to mention his wallpapering skills to a friend who kindly offered to pop in and look after him while we went away for a few days. She was horrified when she walked in one morning and found a large strip of paper on the floor and Dougie happily ripping it to bits. She rushed around with the vacuum cleaner

to try and cover up the evidence – convinced that it was all her fault.

The house we lived in at that time had an attic conversion with a balcony above the living room. We used this extra space as a bedroom and to get up to it you had to climb a ladder fixed against the wall. During the first few weeks of his arrival we debated whether Dougie would be able to climb it, but we thought it highly unlikely.

And for a while it did seem that he was content just to sit on the sofa and watch us climb the ladder to bed at night. However, in hindsight, it would appear that all the time he was devising a plan to join us.

One evening we were both watching the television when he jumped off my lap, casually walked to the other side of the living room, looked across at us both briefly and then ran as fast as he could across the floor (using it rather like a runway), launching himself into the air and landing in a rather undignified way on the last but one rung of the ladder.

For a few seconds he just seemed to hang there, dangling precariously and wondering what to do next, before lifting his back legs onto the rung beneath him and pushing himself up onto the ledge of the gallery. He looked down at us both, swished his tail in the air and trotted off for a lie down on the bed.

The next question, of course, was how was he going to get back down?

Sure enough, a little while later he was perched at the top of the ladder, looking down quizzically at the floor below. After a few minutes of looking at us then looking again at the floor, he simply put his front paws on the second rung of the ladder, his bottom and tail comically sticking out, and then launched himself into mid air, landing safely on the living room carpet.

A few years later we moved to a new house and one of the first things we did was have a cat flap installed. We were sure it wouldn't take him long to work out how to use it – especially as he'd been using the previous neighbour's cat flap for some time! Fortunately the neighbour was a friend and found it rather amusing when she arrived home sometimes to find him curled up asleep on her sofa.

