



## Issue: Stress in Cats

All animals are capable of becoming stressed and cats are no exception. Stress is a vital warning system that produces the fight-or-flight response necessary for survival. Although this response is beneficial for safety, too much stress can be detrimental and can weaken the immune system. Long-term stress may also lead to the development of behavior problems and possibly even disease. It's important to learn all signs of stress in cats so we can take a closer look at their situation and be proactive to keep stress levels to a minimum.

### How to Spot a Stressed Cat

#### **Over-grooming**

Cats naturally clean themselves throughout the day, usually after a meal or play, but if you start to notice your cat grooming more often than usual, this may be a red flag for stress. If the grooming appears to be concentrated on one specific area on their body for long periods of time, they may be over-grooming as a coping mechanism for stress. Look for little patches of missing fur, especially on their legs, stomach and lower body.

#### **Hiding or keeping distance**

Fearful or stressed cats may distance themselves from you, other people, or animals in the home. They usually pick dark, isolated, and tight spaces to hide in order to feel safe. A stressed cat may begin sleeping in the closet, under the bed, or in their litter box. When a cat starts to hide or avoid interactions out of the blue that is a clear indication of stress. Be mindful of the cat's overall body language – if they appear relaxed, their body stretched out, and they readily exit the space to interact, they probably picked a new nap spot. If they appear tense, their body tucked into itself appearing smaller and they have wide eyes, they are probably hiding.

#### **Inappropriate Elimination**

Sudden changes in litter box use is another indicator that a cat is stressed. Litter box accidents may occur for many reasons, but it's not unusual for a stressed cat to avoid the litter box. An uncomfortable cat may avoid certain areas in the home to avoid the stressor stimuli, so if the litter box is located in an area they're trying to avoid they will likely be more inclined to eliminate in a new spot. Marking areas in the home also serves to surround themselves with their own scent to help make them feel more comfortable. Decreased Appetite: A stressed cat may have less of an appetite. This may

be more difficult to observe in a multi-cat household, especially if they're being free-fed. Try to pay attention to your cat's eating habits to see if anything has changed.

### **Increased Aggression**

A cat that feels an immediate threat may resort to displaying defensive aggressive behavior. The cat's body posture may be crouched, their ears bent back, their eyes are dilated, and they may be hissing or growling. Any combination of these signs are clear signs that your cat is extremely stressed. Try to observe if this behavior is displayed towards a specific family member, whether pet or human. You will need to re-evaluate the situation, and find out what's triggering the cat before you start making changes.

### **How to Help a Cat De-Stress**

#### **First, rule out medical issues.**

If your cat is acting out of character, your first step should be to schedule a vet visit. A cat's behavior can certainly change if they're feeling under the weather or if they have an underlying medical condition, which can cause moderate to severe stress – especially if they're in pain.

#### **Try to identify the trigger.**

Cats are sensitive to certain smells, noises, other animals, and changes in their environment. Chronic stress tends to be more subtle and may be easily missed since it typically occurs when a cat is left in a state of uncertainty, but a good indication is if your cat's behavior has changed recently. Try to look at your cat's world through their perspective. For example, how would you feel your bathroom was rarely cleaned? What if you had to be on alert during meal time so you won't get ambushed by another resident pet? Would you enjoy loud construction noise next door? Most of these stressors can be modified or eliminated once we're able to pinpoint what they are, that way you can make the appropriate adjustments needed to help make them comfortable.

#### **Slow introductions to change.**

If you can anticipate changes in the home, try to make them happen gradually. If there is a new baby or pet, you want to make sure your cat remains confident in their own territory so they don't view this new family member as a threat. Use scent swapping, monitor interactions while using positive reinforcement, and provide quality time alone with your cat to help your cat adjust to these changes. If you need to change food or litter, make sure it's a brand your cat will like, and then gradually change the new brand by mixing it in with the old one, putting a little more each day before changing it completely.

#### **Enrichment**

Enrichment is a great way to keep your cat busy. If your cat has a lot of energy or gets bored easily, puzzle feeders and interactive toys can help keep them mentally

stimulated. A cat that is kept busy may not focus too much on changes in the environment.

### **Spend more quality time with your cat.**

A lot of people believe cats are solitary creatures because they're independent, but they're actually very social animals and enjoy having company! Playing with your cat will help them feel more confident in their surroundings. If your cat prefers lounging around, they may just need someone to sit around with and check in on them every once in a while. If you anticipate being away from home for a long period of time, it's always good to have a sitter that can check on your cat and provide them company. You can also leave your cat with an item or a piece of clothing with your scent on it to help keep your kitty relaxed.

### **Use pheromones and calming scents.**

Feliway is a synthetic calming pheromone that can help reduce stress. They are usually undetectable by humans and you can purchase them as plug-ins or in spray form, just be sure to never spray any scents directly onto your cat. Lavender, valerian root, and chamomile scents can also help cats relax. A cat's nose is extremely powerful, so be mindful and keep the intensity level on low whether you're using a scented spray or plug in. If the smell is strong for you, it may be overwhelming for your cat.

Hopefully, this information will give you an idea of what your cat needs, but each cat is an individual and the way they respond to stressful situations is as unique as they are. Some cats handle stress better than others and their level of socialization will play an important role. The key takeaway is to look at your cat's situation through their eyes in an attempt to identify the stressor. Once you have an idea of what the stressor may be, you can then make the appropriate adjustments in your home to make sure they feel more secure.

**Related flyers:** *"Environmental Enrichment", "Helping a Fearful Cat", "Introducing Cats to children", "Introducing Cat to Cat", "New Home Adjustment Period"*

### **For more information:**

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: <https://m.iaabc.org>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org>