

# MINIMIZING STRESS IN CATS IN A MODERN WORLD



Despite having been domesticated for thousands of years, domestic cats are not the ideal species to try to fit into the average household. For most of that time, cats were mainly outdoors or indoor-outdoor. In today's world it's not safe for cats outside, so many live strictly indoors. Living outdoors gave cats control over their routines and their environment. Nowadays they may be completely dependant on their owners for everything – food, water, play, elimination and the timing of all of these. This alone is stressful for the independent nature of a cat.

Many behavioral and health problems in cats are related to the fact that we expect them to live in an environment they are not quite suited for. The better job you do adjusting your household to the emotional and behavioral style of the feline, the happier and less stressed your cat will be. Less stress reduces the risk of vomiting, bladder disease, overgrooming and behavior problems.

Chronic stress in pets has health consequences just as it does in people. People tend to get an upset stomach when they are worried. In cats, the bladder often is the organ that becomes inflamed and uncomfortable. Feline bladder disease may flare up with a move, introduction of a new pet or family member or a stressful time in the home, such as a divorce. Anti-anxiety medication or the use of Feliway before and during stressful times can be very helpful, especially for nervous cats.

## Litter Box Avoidance

Any litter box problems are bound to get a lot worse if the cat associates the litter pan with pain from an inflamed bladder. If a cat has been in pain in the litter box they associate the box with the pain and will often avoid going in it again. They don't understand that the box didn't cause the pain, they don't think that way. Instinctively they will avoid a place or situation that was uncomfortable for them.

Feline attention to cleanliness is an adaptive strategy for survival. Burial of stool and urine reduces the ability of predators to locate a cat's territory via smell, while minimizing the transfer of parasites and disease. Feline attention to cleanliness is one of the most positive aspects of cat behavior for most owners. However, their desire for clean and private toilet facilities means some thought and effort must be given to those.

Cats desire a secluded location, since they are vulnerable to predators when using the litter box. This is instinctive, it doesn't matter that there are no actual predators in the household the cat lives in. The litter and the box should be kept very clean, and the litter itself should be of a texture the cat likes. Most cats like the fine, granular clumping litters best, with no scent.

## Vertical Space

In a natural feline environment, cats have free and immediate access to essential resources at all times, which helps them to feel in control of their environment. This includes food and litter boxes, and also access to vertical space. Flight and hiding are both important to felines. Failure to provide ways they can do these things leads to chronic stress.

For example, having a high shelf, a tall scratching post or the top of the refrigerator to perch on is very important to them. Having high places to go relaxes many cats because their natural strategy for minimizing fear and anxiety is to climb.

Some cats prefer to hide on the ground – in the wild they might hide in a bush instead of climbing a tree. Providing a dark, quiet place can make a big difference to these cats. Many larger scratching posts provide both height and a dark place. A good multi-leveled cat tree allows cats to climb, and is essential if you want to keep your cat off of countertops and shelving.

A cat's primary defensive strategy is flight. In nature, cats are both predators and preyed upon by larger animals. They tend to view punishment or being



restrained as an attack and will behave accordingly, often injuring someone with their fight or flight response.

The human tendency to pick up cats to cuddle or restrain them can seem potentially threatening to them. To help avoid problems, early handling of kittens should include lifting, gently restraining, and touching the kitten all over its body. It's best to let cats come to you for petting rather than to follow them around grabbing them – an important concept to teach to children with pets.



## Playtime

Ensuring that cats expend sufficient mental and physical energy during the day is important for weight control and physical and mental fitness. Cats are designed for short bursts of energy-consuming activity (as in hunting for mice), interspersed with periods of rest and relaxation. Misdirected predatory behaviors (such as attacking the owner's feet under the covers) can contribute to stress and frustration for both cat and owner. Inappropriate habits may arise when cats don't get enough play and exercise, including overeating, overgrooming and attacking or chewing inappropriate objects.

Providing active play at least twice a day helps to burn off some of a cat's play drive and energy. It also burns calories and keeps the cat happy. If you go on YouTube and search on "cats on exercise wheels" you can see cats entertaining and exercising themselves on big wheels and treadmills. Cats want to exercise and often enjoy it enough to seek out these seemingly un-catlike activities. Couch potato cats are not only unhealthy but often they are chronically depressed.

Interactive play involves acceptable chase and attack behavior.

- Play with your cat using a toy that they can attack or chase. Good interactive toys are Cat Dancers, Cat Charmers, Da Birds, and other string or wire toys. These are wonderful toys as long as they are put away as soon as you are done playing with them since cats love to eat string-like material.
- Other interactive options are throwing balls, wads of paper, other toys or treats for your kitten to chase.
- Cats generally like regular routines with interactive play. Try to play with your cat 2-3 times daily for 10 – 20 minutes at approximately the same time each day.

- Never allow your cat to play with your hands or feet. If your cat attacks your feet when you go up and down the stairs, carry an appropriate toy with you so that the cat can attack the toy instead of you. If problems persist, avoid all interactions with your cat for a few minutes to allow more calm behavior. Then start interactive play and praise him for playing with the toy.
- Cats can also be trained to do tricks or commands, and even run agility courses like dogs!

Independent play allows your cat to play by his or herself.

- Leave out toys for the cat to learn to play by his or herself. Good independent toys are tunnels, boxes, paper bags, food puzzles, and cat trees.
- Toys should be rotated (in some cases even daily) to prevent boredom.



## Social Interaction

Cats are social animals, both with other cats and with other species, including humans and dogs. The social scene is important to the happiness of cats. Changes in the family, such as moving, divorce, marriage or new children, can lead to emotional overload. Even a simple change in who feeds the cat or at what time of day can matter. It's often impossible to eliminate these causes of stress completely but do your best to stick to a routine when you can.



Other household pets are a factor too. Although many cats are quite happy living in households with dogs, if a cat and a dog are not friends, the cat is likely to be very stressed. Introductions between cats and puppies or dogs need to be done carefully. Cat owners need to be aware of and sensitive to the dynamics between all the members of the household. Take steps to limit interactions and give cats escape routes when necessary.

This is at least as true when there are children in the household. The toddler stage can be especially difficult for household pets. Shy cats can suffer immensely when exposed to too many people, too much commotion and little humans who don't recognize their need for quiet and personal space. It is also stressful for a cat used to social interaction when everyone is busy and suddenly their petting time goes away. This is common when a new baby comes into the home.

Cats living the wild life outdoors socialize and live in groups of related individuals they know well. Brothers, sisters, moms, aunts, uncles and cousins hang out together. Strangers - unrelated cats - are incorporated into a group of cats very slowly, if at all. It usually takes a year or more for a newcomer to gradually work her way into a social group. She (or he, but unneutered males are more likely to be loners) spends month after month hanging around on the outskirts of a group until finally being accepted.

Yet in our homes, we expect a new cat to be best buds with the resident cat within a few weeks - it's not a very realistic thing to ask of a cat! (In fact, it's much the same with people. You wouldn't expect a newly adopted child or the new kid in the classroom to be adjusted and settled in after only a few weeks.)

Aggression or tension among housemates may result in outright physical confrontation and injury, but more commonly feline tension can result in subtle signs of unease and chronic low-grade stress. Urine spraying, litter box avoidance, overgrooming,

avoidance of areas in the home that were formerly a cat's sleeping places and other signs may result.

When introducing a new cat, it's best if each cat has his or her own territory, sleeping places, litter box and food and water bowls. It usually works well to keep the new cat in a separate bedroom for several weeks before slowly introducing him to the rest of the house. Give the resident cat his very favorite snack treat whenever the new cat is close by, at least for a few weeks. (Try sardines, tuna or bits of chicken.) That way, she'll come to associate the newcomer with good things. Kittens are usually more easily introduced than older cats.

Antianxiety medication can make all the difference in the world for stressful times in a cat's life. We can make introductions and transitions go much more smoothly with pharmaceutical intervention! Sometimes cats need help to get through hard times.

## How to Feed Cats to Reduce Stress

**Good nutrition for cats is not only about what to feed but also how and when you deliver food.**

Food rewards and extra treats decrease stress. Just giving a cat 4 extra treats a day has been shown to reduce symptoms of bladder disease. This simple little change in routine can make a difference. If your cat likes Pill Pockets for treats and gets them regularly he or she is less likely to notice when you hide medication inside them. These are a good treat to give and may make medicating easier down the road. Extra treats and playtime help to bond a new cat to you and strengthen the relationship between you and your cat throughout its life.

### Cats are natural-born nibblers

A cat's metabolism is designed to take in small amounts of food frequently throughout the day. It takes eight 35-calorie mice per day to feed an average-sized cat. This is approximately equal to ten kibbles of dry food. You may think it normal for a cat to sit by a bowl and eat until it is empty, but cats normally prefer to graze. They eat a few mouthfuls of food and walk away, intending to come back later. Walking away from a food after a few bites doesn't mean your cat doesn't like her food or is being fussy! This is normal cat behavior.



Meal feeding twice a day can cause cats to overeat, and/or to gulp their food and regurgitate. It is also stressful for the cat, since it goes against their normal, instinctive behavior. Overeating at meals is especially common when there are multiple cats in the household competing with each other.

### Cats aren't social eaters

Humans like to eat in groups, so many pet owners assume that cats do, too. Pet owners commonly feed multiple cats in the same location. In fact, some cats will eat poorly because of the anxiety associated with being forced to eat in a group, while others will overeat. Even cats that are socially compatible in other situations prefer to eat alone.

### At-home advice for cat owners

- Weigh or measure the amount of food you feed each day.
- Divide the food up into multiple portions. Feed small, frequent meals.

- Deliver the food in ways that give the cat more control over food acquisition. Food puzzles or hiding small amounts of food in multiple locations helps cats to feel they are hunting for their dinner and burns calories. Playing with your cat before meals also helps to simulate hunting and reduce stress.



- Cats feel safer at higher elevations, so feed cats from a counter, cat tree or perch when possible. Each platform should be small enough that only one cat can eat there at a time. Quiet locations are best.
- Feed cats separately. Establish multiple feeding stations. Automatic feeders that only open for the cat whose microchip or RFD tag has been programmed in can keep cats from eating each other's food. Some are designed to hold an ice pack to keep canned food from spoiling during the day.

## In Summary

Hopefully these tips will help you provide a safe, secure and happy environment for your cat. Please call us for advice if your cat seems unhappy or is exhibiting behavior problems – we can help! You can also visit the Indoor Pet Initiative website at [indoorpet@osu.edu](mailto:indoorpet@osu.edu) or the CATylist Council at [www.Catalystcouncil.org](http://www.Catalystcouncil.org).

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