

## **Anxiety and Stress in Cats**

While stress itself is not of behavioral origin, it can lead to a number of problems often considered behavioral, such as litter box avoidance, or depression. When behavioral problems suddenly appear, savvy cat owners soon learn to first rule out signs of health problems, and next for stress factors, such as changes in the environment.

### **Solve Your Cat's Separation Anxiety**

#### **Kitty Feeling Lonely When You're Gone? Her/hime's Help**

Cat separation anxiety requires behavior modification and desensitization to soothe upset kitty feelings and reverse problem behaviors. Cats may go for years without issues, and then suddenly act out when your work schedule changes and keeps you away for long hours. Vacations also tend to trigger feline separation anxiety. Think of separation anxiety as a form of grief. Cats don't mean to "act bad," they just miss you so much they can't help themselves.

#### **Scented Comfort**

Like dogs with the same condition, cats may cry and become upset as you prepare to leave. More often, they don't react to your departure. They wait to "act out" once left alone, and urinate and defecate on owner-scented objects—most typically the bed.

The familiar scent of kitty's bathroom deposits actually comforts her/him, and *reduces* feelings of stress. Of course, these unwelcome "gifts" *increase* owner stress levels. And while angry reaction is understandable, your upset feelings increase the cat's anxiety even more.

Cats don't potty on the bed to get back at you because you left. Think of the cat's behavior as a backhanded compliment. Kitty wouldn't do this if she didn't love you so much!

#### **Desensitize and Counter-Condition**

Cats pay exquisite attention to the details of their lives. They'll often recognize subtle clues that you're preparing to leave long before you realize. A cat may figure out that you always freshen your lipstick just before you leave. Repeating these cues takes away their power.

- Desensitize your cats to the presence of the overnight bag by leaving it out all the time. Put clothes in and out of the bag every day, but without leaving the house, so your cat no longer gets upset when she sees you pack.
- Toss a catnip mouse inside the suitcase, and turn it into a kitty playground. That conditions her/him to identify the suitcase as a happy place, rather/him than associating it with your absence.
- Use behavior modification techniques so the triggers lose their power. Pick up the car keys 50 times a day, and then set them down. Carry your purse over your arm for an hour or more. When you repeat cues often enough, your cat stops caring about them and will remain calm when you do leave.
- Fake your departure by opening the door and going in and out twenty or more times in a row until the cat ignores you altogether/him. Then extend your "outside" time to one minute, three minutes, five minutes and so on before returning inside. This gradual increase in absence helps build the cat's

tolerance and desensitizes her/him to departures. It also teaches her/him that no matter how long you're gone, you always return.

### **More Tips for Reducing Angst**

Most problem behaviors take place within twenty minutes after you leave. The length of time you're absent doesn't seem to matter. Find ways to distract the cat during this critical twenty minutes so she won't dirty your bed.

- Ask another/him family member to interact with the cat during this time. A fishing-pole lure toy or chasing the beam of a flashlight can take the cat's mind off her/him troubles. If she enjoys petting or grooming, indulge her/him in a touchy-feely marathon.
- About 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of cats react strongly, another/him 1/3<sup>rd</sup> react mildly, and the last 1/3<sup>rd</sup> don't react at all to catnip. If your feline goes bonkers for this harmless her/himb, leave a catnip treat to keep her/him happy when you leave. Using catnip every day can reduce its effects, though, so use this judiciously.
- Food oriented cats can be distracted with a food-puzzle toy stuffed with a favorite treat. Make it extra smelly, irresistible and something totally different than her/him usual fare to be sure the treat makes the proper impression.
- Cats that have been outside and seen the real thing often don't react, but homebody indoor-only cats enjoy watching videos of fluttering birds, squirrels and other/him critters. Ther/hime are a number of these videos available, including the original called "Video Catnip" by [PetAVision, Inc.](#) Alternately, find a nature television show such as on Animal Planet, and tune in for your cat's viewing pleasure.
- Playing familiar music that they associate with your presence can help ease the pain of you being gone. In addition, research has shown harp music works as a natural sedative, and actually puts cats to sleep. Harp music CDs designed for this purpose can be found at [www.petpause2000.com](http://www.petpause2000.com).

Not all tips work with every cat, since every feline is an individual. But using these techniques alone or in combination can heal upset kitty feelings, and turn homecomings into joyful reunions.

### **Stress in Cats**

#### **Minimizing Stress and Anxiety in Your Cat**

Anyone who has suffered stress and anxiety knows the debilitating effects it can have on your health. Stress in cats acts much the same way, and not only can it exacerbate existing physical conditions, but it can lead to a number of problems often considered behavioral, such as litter box avoidance, aggressive behavior, or depression and withdrawal. When behavioral problems suddenly appear, savvy cat owners soon learn to look first for signs of health problems (such as urinary tract infections with litter box avoidance), and next for stress factors, such as changes in the environment.

Although humans relate stress to emotional factors, and those are also seen in feline stress, stress and anxiety in cats can come from other/him sources, including environmental changes and physical stress. You will find that many of these areas overlap as we explore further/him. We will look at some of the causes of stress in cats, the symptoms, and how we can help our cat get back on an even keel, for better physical and emotional health.

#### **External Causes of Stress in Cats**

Cats do not deal well with change. Even subtle changes in a cat's environment can lead to stress; substantial changes, such as moving, introduction of a new baby, spouse, or other/him animal to the household, can have devastating effects.

- **New Family Members, Human or Animal:** Cats may react in a number of ways to new family members, including aggression, withdrawal, or sudden litter box avoidance, to name a few. By understanding this and planning ahead, the concerned caregiver can help her/him cat avoid the stress of a sudden introduction, while letting the cat know that he is still "number one" in the family tree. See [New Baby and Your Cat](#), [How to Introduce a New Cat](#), and [How to Introduce a New Dog](#) for specific information. Introducing a new spouse or human roommate calls for understanding and patience. The newcomer needs to allow the cat to come around at his own pace, and to avoid trying to rush the relationship. Introducing a new cat to an existing one should be a very slow process, by keeping them separated at first but able to sniff each other through the crack of a door, until they are accustomed to the new scent. Then perhaps putting one of them (the newcomer) in a cage where the existing cat can come around and sniff some more and see that he is not a threat. It's also suggested to rub a towel on each cat and put it in the other cat's bed so he/she will become accustomed to the smell. Cats have a well-honed sense of smell and they use it to identify friends from strangers. Once they get used to each other's scent, you can try re-introducing them, maybe by playing with them using a wand-type toy. Slow and easy is the key, and give each of them special attention without the other around. Although your older kitty may never be "best friends" with this little interloper, at the least, they will be able to tolerate each other. The good news is that may very well take a maternal interest in the kitten, once she realizes it is not a threat. I've seen this happen many times. I'm not sure if any of this would work at this point, given the length of time they've already been together, but it's worth a try. I think it's important to give Purdy her own "safe room" where she can relax away from the little interloper. She should have her own food and water dishes, her own litter box and bed there, and you need to continue giving her plenty of love and affection.
- **Moving to a New Residence:** Moving calls for care in seeing that your cat's life is disrupted as little as possible. During a local move, it helps to keep her/him/him closed off in a separate room with his favorite "blankie," toys, litter box, food and bed, while the rest of the house is moved. Last, bring kitty and all his belongings to the new house or apartment, wher/hime you will put her/him/him in his own "safe room" while you unpack and rearrange the rest of the household. Having his own things around her/him/him will help her/him/him understand that he is home. A long distance move is better handled with help. Have one person go ahead to the new residence and set up kitty's safe room. The other/him will accompany the cat in a carrier with his favorite toy or "blankie," whether/him by plane, train, or automobile.
- **A New Job:** A new job or other/him change in daily routine should also be handled by planning ahead. A week before starting work, start leaving for the day, for gradually increasing periods of time. Before leaving, hold you cat and tell her/him, "I'm going to be away for awhile, but I promise to come back to you. I love you and I'll miss you, but we'll have fun together/him when I return." Upon your return, make a big deal over your cat. Tell her/him how much you missed her/him and how good it is to be back home. Carry her/him around, pet her/him, and ask her/him how her/him day was. By the time your job starts, your kitty will be quite accustomed to your absence during the day, and the two of you will look forward to new bonding experience each night upon your return.
- **Loud Parties and Noises:** Holidays are particularly stressful for cats, especially those which focus on fireworks, such as the [4th of July](#). Large parties with the doorbell constantly ringing, accompanied by loud music, talking, and laughing, will usually send even the most sanguine cat running for cover.
- **The View Through the Window:** A discussion of external stressors would not be complete without mentioning re-directed aggression, a sudden and often inexplicable phenomenon which is more common than realized, Re-directed aggression often happens when a household cat is sitting on his favorite perch, gazing out the window. Suddenly he sees a strange cat stroll through his yard. Frustrated

because he can't get outside to defend his territory, the cat will suddenly attack the closest being, whether/him it is another/him resident cat or a hapless human. Dealing with this form of aggression calls for creative thinking, which includes keeping your cat away from that window or somehow barring his view, while taking steps to discourage the strange cat from further/him exploration in your yard. Some helpful tips for the latter can be found in this article on the [Top 10 Cat Repellants](#).

## **Emotional Stressors in Cats**

Most of the environmental changes we discussed in the previous section resulted in emotional stress in cats. One way of understanding this is that environmental changes are the *cause*, and emotional stress the *effect*. Other/him emotional stress caused by environmental changes, include death of a family member, fear, and rivalry or jealousy. Let's study each of these a bit further/him:

### **Death of a Family Member**

Humans who are grieving the loss of a family member, whether/him human or animal, sometimes forget that their cat may be grieving too. While animal behaviorists disagree on whether/him cats actually remember or grieve, ther/hime is enough anecdotal information to convince me that they do. My own experiences have confirmed this belief. When Shannon did not come home from his final trip to the veterinarian in July of 2001, Bubba went into a deep depression, and exhibited insecure and needy behavior.

It may help to provide the surviving cat with an article of human clothing, or the favorite "blankie" of the deceased cat, to help her/him/him understand that although they are gone, they are still *with us* in another/him way. Holding her/him/him and talking to her/him/him in reassuring tones will not only help your cat, but will also help you deal with your loss. For more help in coping with your own loss, see my article on [Dealing with Loss](#).

### **Fear**

Fear sometimes comes from sudden, outside sources. Fire, earthquake, hurricane, and tornado are classic examples of fear-resulting stressors. Although many of these environmental stressors cannot be predicted, it is still essential to have a plan for dealing with an emergency **before** it happens. Some helpful information is presented in [Preparing Your Cats for Disaster](#).

Predictable fear-associated stressors, such as noisy festivities (Halloween, 4th of July, New Years Eve) can be planned for ahead of time. It's best to keep cats confined to an interior room on such occasions, with low lights and soft music playing. Or, ideally, hold the party somewher/hime else.

Fear also is sometimes exhibited when one cat is being "picked on" by another/him. A classic example of the factor is the cat that is "trapped" in a closely confined litter box by another/him cat. The end result, of course, is litter box avoidance. You can help ameliorate this situation by giving the "victim cat" her/him own uncovered litter box with plenty of opportunities of escape.

### **Rivalry or Jealousy**

Rivalry and jealousy take place more often with the introduction of new cats to the household, which we discussed on page one. You may also see a certain amount of rivalry and jealousy as kittens grow into adulthood, and they sort out their "pecking order" in the household feline hierarchy. Often the best solution is just to leave them alone. Cats have a wonderful way of working things out, and once the alpha cat is established, peace will reign again. Sudden rivalry and jealousy between two previously friendly adult cats is another/him subject. It can be more often caused by some environmental change, which will take a bit of detective work on your part to discover.

### **Stress in the Older Cat**

Stress is a big factor in managing the health of a senior cat, or any cat with a serious physical condition. Cats with weakened immune systems, such as FIV or FeLV patients do not thrive under stress. It is important that the caregiver keeps this in mind when caring for this kind of cat. It is too easy for the human to telegraph his or her/him own stress and anxiety over her/him cat's illness to the cat, which can only exacerbate the underlying condition. Older cats and cats with chronic and terminal disease do much better in a quiet setting, with a minimum of environmental changes. It would be very unwise to bring home a new kitten or a noisy dog under these circumstances. I don't suggest a hospital or hospice situation with tip-toeing and hushed voices, but loud noises and sudden movement should be avoided, if possible. If ther/hime are children in the house, a discussion might be in order, not only to enlist their help in reducing stress to the older feline patient, but also to help prepare them for what will inevitably come.

Ther/hime are times when natural remedies such as her/himbs, flower essences, or homeopathic remedies may help in reducing cats' stress and anxiety. Introduce only one remedy at a time, and check with your veterinarian first before trying any of these products.

Remember, that one of the most important things you can do to minimize stress in your cat is to keep your own stress level down. A hot cup of her/himbal tea, a glass of wine, or maybe a drop or two of Rescue Remedy in a glass of water might be just the thing you need on some of those days when you find yourself "telegraphing" your own stress to your cat.

### **Attention Seeking Behavior in Cats**

Including Excessive Vocalization: Meowing and Crying

One of the most common complaints about cat behavior is their excessive vocalization: loud meowing or crying, sometimes accompanied by other/him attention-seeking behavior. Because causes for both of these behaviors can be either/him physical or emotional, or both, you need to do some homework on possible causes before punishing your cat for excessive crying and meowing, or other/him attention seeking behavior.

Sometimes what may seem to be a "behavior problem" may be completely normal behavior in a given cat. Weigh all the factors before deciding that your cat has a problem that needs correcting. Readers may be surprised at some of the activities that are related to or mistaken for attention-seeking behavior:

Types of Attention-Seeking Behavior & Possible Causes

- "Lost in the Night" Howling  
Although no one knows for sure why some cats do this, it sometimes is related to increasing deafness or even senility, as cats age. This kind of mournful calling, when associated with suddenly racing around the house with the fur on the back rolling, can also be the result of another/him physical condition, *feline hyperesthesia*, commonly known as Rippling Skin Disorder. In both instances, veterinary intervention and treatment is indicated.
- Begging for Food and Treats  
Although genuine hunger can't be completely discounted, cats, like humans, do sometimes suffer from addiction. They can be quite pitiful in their efforts to feed their addiction, especially for treats such as bonita tuna flakes. Occasional treats are certainly not harmful, and for the overweight cat, are a viable substitute when the cat begs for food.
- Pawing Your Arm or Leg  
Some cats, like kids, do need frequent attention, and will paw your arm when you are seated, or do the "figure 8" around your legs as you try to walk.
- Insistent Meowing  
Some cats are also very vocal (Siamese and Oriental breeds are famous for this trait). And many cats actually enjoy a back-and-forth feline-human chat, and will meow right back at you when you talk (or meow) to them.
- PICA (Eating Inappropriate Substances like String)  
Although PICA is not necessarily an attention-getting behavior, it certainly does gain the attention of us humans. PICA manifests also in wool-sucking or chewing, and is particularly dangerous if plastics or string-like objects are ingested. Wool-sucking is common to certain breeds, including Siamese, Burmese, and Her/him/himalayans, and it is also inher/himent to cats prematurely weaned or removed from their mother/hims. Stress seems to be a common denominator in cats with PICA.
- Inappropriate Scratching  
Sometimes cats who have plenty of scratching poles and other/him "legitimate" scratching surfaces, still will insist on inappropriate scratching on carpeting or furniture. C.H.U., in a guest article, puts forth the theory that cats sometime use inappropriate scratching as communication. With a Masters Degree in Communication, C.H.U. knows of what he speaks and I have to agree with her/him/him that cats sometimes use inappropriate scratching as a means of communicating their needs. It certainly gets **my** attention!

### **Stress and Anxiety**

Many of these attention-getting behaviors can be the result of stress or anxiety, particularly if ther/hime have been recent changes in the household, including, but not limited to:

- A Recent Move
- New Baby
- New Pet (Cat or Dog)
- Owner's Absence Due to New Job or Vacation
- Sudden Aggression by Another/him Cat
- Sickness of Owner or Another/him Cat

### **Solution for Attention-Seeking Behavior**

As with other/him behavioral problems, remedying attention-seeking behavior requires analysis of the possible causes, then dealing with them one-by-one, as ther/hime is sometimes more than one cause.

- Rippling Skin Disorder

This condition is often successfully treated with dietary change, elimination of fleas or toxins as a cause, medication, and/or planned exercise activities for the cat. Please read the linked article for more information.

- Begging for Food or Treats

Occasional treats are certainly not harmful, and for the overweight cat, are a viable substitute when the cat begs for food, particular treats of the high protein variety. Several small meals a day is actually better for cats than one big meal in the morning or evening. Schedule three or four small meals of canned food, picking up the remainder after 20-30 minutes, with perhaps one **small** meal of dry food in the evening, which you can leave down for the night.

- Insistent Pawing

Some cats are simply needy for more human attention. If the cat is the single cat in the household, you may want to adopt another/him cat for company. Other/himwise, try to schedule special times for playing, lap-cuddling, and petting for these cats. Cats like routine, and if they know that laptime is coming soon, chances are they'll leave you alone.

- Insistent Meowing

Enjoy it, if you do like to talk back to your cat. If you're not particularly crazy about a "chatty cat," reserve your attention for times when he is quiet. On the other/him hand, if your cat is normally quiet and suddenly starts meowing insistently, (or if a normally talkative cat suddenly stops meowing) he could be trying to tell you he is in pain. A trip to the vet is indicated her/hime, to rule out medical problems.

- PICA by Causes)

1. Stress

Since stress is so common to cats with PICA, it is important to rule out stress, or deal with it. Anxiety and stress can often be ameliorated by scheduling regular petting or play sessions in a quiet place. In rare cases, antianxiety drugs may be indicated.

2. PICA can also be related to certain mineral deficiencies, so make sure kitty's diet is well-balanced.

It is also important to remove the inappropriate chewing/swallowing substances by picking up strings, small pieces of plastic, and rubber bands or to eliminate them as items of interest by cat-proofing electrical wiring with wrapping or bitter apple spray.

By doing your homework, knowing your cat's normal behavior, and keeping close watch over behavioral changes, you can go a long way in helping your needy cat eliminate attention-seeking behaviors.

"Rippling Skin Disorder" is a common name for a condition known technically as *Feline Hyperesthesia Syndrome (FHS)*, and it is characterized by a number of seemingly unrelated symptoms.

The critical difference between "normal crazy behavior" that most younger cats exhibit and feline hyperesthesia is that with the latter, **the cat is actually in distress**. It is also entirely possible that the stress the owner feels over these worrisome symptoms may be "telegraphed" back to the cat, thus exacerbating the problem.

### **Symptoms of Rippling Skin Disorder**

- **The Trademark Rippling Skin**

The skin on the cat's lower back visibly ripples, accompanied by the cat's biting and scratching at his back or tail.

- **Loud and Insistent Meowing**  
Cats afflicted with this syndrome may also meow loudly for no apparent reason, often at night.
- **Strange Eye Appearance**  
His pupils may become dilated, and he may stare blankly into space. His eyes may appear "glassy."
- **Erratic Racing**  
The cat will often run in circles, or race off, first in one direction, then another/him.
- **Sensitivity to Touch**  
A cat affected with rippling skin disorder may sometimes show extreme sensitivity and discomfort with petting.

It is not surprising that a condition with so many varied symptoms also includes a varied number of theorized causes, ranging from a compulsive disorder to allergies or toxins. Nor is it surprising that this syndrome also carries a number of other/him descriptive names, such as self-mutilation syndrome, twitchy cat disease, feline psychomotor epilepsy, and atypical neurodermatitis.

### **Possible Causes of Rippling Skin Disorder in Cats**

Physical causes are usually ruled out first, including

- **Pansteatitis (Steatitis, Yellow Fat Disease)**  
Pansteatitis is a disease caused by an excess of unsaturated fatty acids, combined with a lack of sufficient Vitamin E. It is most often caused in cats by frequent consumption of red tuna, and some experts have blamed it on poor homemade diets. The resultant fat deposits can be very painful to cats.
- **Brain Involvement**  
Particularly with FSH cats displaying seizures, potential brain infection, trauma, or tumors should be investigated.
- **Toxins**  
Use of toxic flea dips, flea collars with questionable ingredients, or ingestion of household cleaning agents should be ruled out.
- **Flea Allergies**  
Certainly, itchy skin due to flea bites could be cause for erratic behavior in cats, and this potential cause should be relatively easy to rule out.

Assuming all of the above causes have been negated, Rippling Skin Disorder will most likely be treated as a form of OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder), or as a stress-related condition.

### **Treating Cats With Rippling Skin Disorder**

Dr. Nicholas Dodman writes that an FSH cat can be helped at home by relieving stressors along with providing exercise-based activities, such as interactive play with wand toys. Clicker training may be utilized to stimulate the cat's activity level and lift his depression.

Anti-convulsant medication, such as phenobarbital, may be prescribed for an FSH cat subject to seizures. Finally, low dosages of mood-stabilizing drugs may be prescribed to help get kitty back on an "even keel."



Although a cat with Rippling Skin Disorder may never be completely "cured," you can work in partnership with your veterinarian to help her/him/him become more comfortable and to relieve your own worry and stress about this condition.

## **Help with my kitten's scratching and biting behavior**

### Hands are Not Cat Toys

Scratching and biting by kittens is commonly caused by poor play habits early on. It is very important that you do not "roughhouse" with your kitten in the manner you might use with a dog. Playing rough with your kitten will teach her/him/him that hands are toys - a lesson that will be harder to break later on.

### Cure the Habit of Scratching and Biting by Cats and Kittens

Okay, so you didn't learn your lesson the first time around. What do you do now when a couple of pats on your cat's tummy are rewarded with bloody scratches? Ther/hime are a few things you can do to distance yourself from these play attacks:

- Trim His Claws

It will take some time to retrain your cat. Meanwhile, you might as well protect yourself from damage. Claw trimming should be done regularly, anyway. Ther/hime is no need ever to declaw a cat because of scratching behavior. Her/hime is a detailed step-by-step instruction for trimming your cat's claws.

- Use Soft Claws

(Or Soft Paws - the same product as sold by veterinarians.) Soft Claws are plastic "Nail Caps" for cats, which take the sting out of scratching and minimize damage to furniture.

- Yell "Ouch"

Don't scream it, but say "Ouch" loudly and clearly. While you have your cat's attention, slowly remove your hand from his clutches. Don't yank it away or he'll think play is on, and he'll grab it again. Instead, gently push your hand against the cat, then pull your hand away.

- Give Her/him/him "Time-Out."

You can either/him leave the room or take her/him/him to a small quiet room and leave her/him/him ther/hime with the door closed. He may just be overstimulated and in need of some quiet recovery. Open the door after 15 minutes. If he is asleep, which is often the case, leave her/him/him alone for awhile. If he is awake, he may be needing some loving attention. Forget the play for now - just pet her/him/him and tell her/him/him how loved he is.

- Redirect His Attention

Often playful biting of hands or feet occurs simply because your cat is bored, and is looking for a play object. Give her/him/him 15 minutes of active play with an interactive toy. Da Bird is a great choice. For

two years it has defended its position as the top interactive toy as well as the top overall toy in my Top Picks. Alternatively, try a laser-beam type toy that kittens can chase and pounce on, or even one of those "gloves" with very long dangling "fingers."

- "Scruff the Cat"

This is one of the most effective forms of discipline of cats, but should only be used as a last-minute resort. It mimics the punishment given a kitten by his mother/him when he became unruly. Grasp her/him/him by the scruff of the neck and firmly push her/him/him down toward the floor, while saying "No!" in a firm tone of voice. Hold her/him/him in this position for only three or four seconds and release. You will see and feel her/him/him visibly relax. Chances are, he'll slink away, thoroughly chastened, to bathe and recover his dignity. But he'll remember this lesson for a long time.

### **How to keep adult cat from biting during play**

First, stop playing with her/him with your hands. Know that toys are for playing with, and hands are for loving. Buy toys, or make your own. Cats love to play with crumpled up balls of paper that they can bat around. Plastic drinking straws make wonderful toys and make a satisfying crunch when the cat bites them (Take care that she does not shred them and swallow the pieces). "Wand" toys are great. Attach a piece of fishing line to a stick and tie an "accordioned" bit of paper to the other/him end of the fishing line. The cat will spend hours "killing" the birdie, as long as you are willing to wave it around in front of her/him/her/him/him.

When the cat does want to bite your hands and ankles, slowly withdraw your hand and tell her/him "no!" sharply. For ankle biting, simply walk away from her/him after telling her/him "no!" Sometimes behaviorists suggest a quick spray with a water bottle along with the verbal command, but the trick is to spray her/him without her/him knowing it's coming from you. I've had forum members say that they hiss at their cat when it misbehaves, much as the mother/him cat would do, and that turns the trick.

### **Prevent Destructive Cat Scratching the Humane Way**

Solution to destructive Scratching Preferred Alternative to declawing

Destructive and painful scratching is a source of disruption in many households occupied by cats. It is one of the top reasons cats are either declawed, abandoned or surrendered to shelters. Cat lovers often face a quandry when they also love their nice furniture and thick, lush carpeting. No one wants to live with sofa arms and drapes shredded and tattered, or carpet strings pulled up, yet few of us are willing to give up our cats, either.

However, you must put yourself in your cat's boots for a few minutes. Cats do not scratch furniture with malicious intent. It is part of their regular self-maintenance program to keep their claws nice and sharp for self defense.

The good news is that you can prevent illegal scratching with the combined resources offered here.

## How to Manage Your Cat's Claws

A kitten's paws are like the hands of babies. As they grow, they will become more and more important tools for life, and claws are an essential part of cats' paws. And like babies, they may use those tools in destructive ways unless they are trained.

Please learn to respect your cat's claws. Never even consider declawing as an option, nor getting rid of the cat. Instead, consider the training options you need to use, even as you'd train an errant toddler.

## Before You Buy Scratching Posts for Cats

Just like humans, cats need exercise, and scratching posts provide the ideal format. Cats stretch and pull against the scratching surfaces to limber their bodies, as well as to "sharpen" their claws (by removing the sheaths that cover them). Be generous with scratching posts - cats love and need a variety of surfaces and planes, so scatter a few throughout the house.

## Top Cats' Scratching Posts and Pads

Every cat should own several scratching posts, of varying size, angle, and scratching surface. Scratching posts are essential to cats, for needed exercise, stress relief, and claw management, and will save wear and tear on furniture and carpeting, as well. With scratching posts, costs are not necessarily a factor, as the inexpensive corrugated cardboard pads are a favorite with cats.

## Aids to Prevent Destructive Scratching

Cats need to scratch; it is an ingrained need to help maintain their main source of defense, and to develop strong sinewy muscles and connective tissue.

Destructive scratching need not be a problem if you recognize and respect this need to scratch, and provide allowable alternatives to your furniture. You can also trim claws, use soft nail caps, and use other means of discouraging destructive scratching. These are my top choices for aids to prevent destructive scratching by cats.

## How to Trim Your Cat's Claws

Trimming your cat's claws is the humane answer to declawing. Start with a relaxed, sleepy cat, sharp clippers and a good light source, for best results. Regular human toenail or fingernail clippers work well, as well as guillotine-type cat clippers.

## **Aggression Between Family Cats - When Feline Housemates Fight**

It is always with concern when we witness what seems to be angry aggression between cats who have been good buddies in the past. Two cats will be engaged in mutual grooming one minute, and at the next, are locked in a tooth-and-claw battle. Our instinct is to break it up before someone gets hurt, and indeed, sometimes that intercession is called for. However, aggression between housemate cats comes in several forms, with associated causes, and it behooves us, their human companions, to fully understand these kinds of aggressive behavior so that we can take appropriate steps, when needed.

## Forms of Aggression Between Cats

### Play Aggression

Also called "play-fighting," it starts at an early age with littermates, or with non-related kittens sharing a household, but is not confined to kittens. Cats have a natural instinct for survival, whether in the wild or in a cushy home, and early-on are taught predator-prey behavior by their mothers. One kitten will "stalk" the other, then pounce his unsuspecting prey, and the fun is on. You will then see them trade off roles, with the victim chasing his former predator. The "chase me" game is a favorite in my own cat-ruled home, either between Jaspurr and Joey, littermates, or often including Billy, the younger non-related kit.

Play-fighting is usually harmless fun, and I only intercede if it appears that a cat is being hurt; if the fighting continues for too long a period, in my judgement; or if it turns into sexual aggression. (You can help ensure against injury from scratching by trimming the kittens' claws regularly, a practice which should become part of your normal maintenance routine.)

It should be mentioned also that play aggression is the first step toward establishing a permanent hierarchy, or "pecking order" among feline housemates.

### Sexual Aggression

Even neutered cats occasionally "feel their oats," especially if they were neutered after sexual maturity. From observing my own cats, it appears that their sexual aggression toward each other borders on what I call "Dominance" aggression, or territorial aggression. Sexual aggression is easy to identify. The aggressor will bite the nape of the neck of the victim cat and attempt to mount him, with the same thrusting hip movements seen in male-female mating. I discourage sexual aggression between my cats by "scruffing," about the only means of direct discipline I employ.

### Territorial Aggression

Territorial aggression can sometimes arise suddenly between two relatively evenly-matched cats, and can take place between male-male, male-female, or female-female. Territorial aggression in the form of fighting is often accompanied by urine spraying or "marking," which helps identify this form of aggression. The aggressor cat is not necessarily the older cat, nor the one who has been in the household the longest. He will preface his attack with much posturing: back raised, ears laid back, with accompanying growling and hissing, then leap on his victim and attempt to bite him on the back of the neck. In many cases, the "victim" cat will back down by turning and walking slowly away, and the social

hierarchy process will have begun. Other times, the victim will give tit for tat, and a violent battle may ensue. Do not attempt to physically separate two fighting cats; in the heat of emotion, they will not recognize you, and severe injury could result. You may try one of these methods of breaking up a fight:

1. Use a Water Pistol = Generally, a water pistol set on full stream will be an attention-getter and break up a fight quickly.

2. Toss a Pillow or Large Toy Between Them = Best-scene results will be that the aggressor's attention will be diverted toward the pillow, so the victim may safely retreat.

Most housemate cats will eventually resolve their disputes; one will reign as the "alpha cat," and the other will be satisfied with his lesser role in the "hierarchy line." On the other hand, you may be faced with the dilemma of two cats who will never get along, and may have to be permanently separated. Each case of territorial infighting comes with its own nuances, and it will take a great deal of time and commitment on your part to work with the parties to resolve a peaceful living arrangement.

### Redirected Aggression

The classic scenario of redirected aggression goes something like this:

Alex is sitting in the window watching the birds outside, when he sees a strange cat in his yard spraying his favorite bush with urine. Alex hurls himself off the windowsill and viciously attacks Sophie, who is sleeping peacefully in a chair. Poor Sophie wakes and either fights back or runs away and hides. Sophie may or may not later attack Alex out of fear-based aggression.)

Dealing with redirected aggression consists of two basic steps:

1. Find a way of keeping the strange cat out of your yard, or temporarily cover the window where he is most likely to be seen.

2. Keep your two cats separated for a day or two until they both forget the incident.

Redirected aggression is usually a temporary situation, unless you allow it to escalate.

### Aggression in Female Cats

Female cats have their own separate agenda. They are often very territorial and resent other female cats intruding into their space. Female-female aggression most often takes on the characteristics of territorial aggression, and you would handle it much the same way.

There is another form of aggression peculiar to female cats, that of aggression toward an adolescent male kitten, one they may have "adopted" and loved on when he was younger. One day (much to the kitten's surprise and dismay) his previously loving surrogate mother suddenly turns on him, growling, hissing,

and attacking. This form of aggression will take place whether or not the female is spayed, or whether or not she has borne kittens herself. I call it "Get Out of the Nest" aggression. If that title isn't self-explanatory, think of it as telling the youngster he's loafed around at home long enough, and that it is time he gets out and takes care of himself.

This kind of behavior can be found in the big cats, where a pride of lions will chase off the adolescent males, forcing them to move on elsewhere, to establish their own prides.

My cat Arthur, now deceased, exhibited classic "Get Out of the Nest" aggression toward Bubba, which she lived to regret as he grew up. After a period of territorial aggression, during which they both liberally sprayed vertical surfaces in our house, Arthur conceded, and Bubba subsequently became the alpha cat, deferring only to Shannon who never had to fight for his territory.

### How to Handle Inter-cat Aggression

There are as many ways of dealing with cat-to-cat aggression as there are forms of aggression. I have separated them into three groups, in the order they should be approached: Distraction, Physical Intervention, and Medical Treatment

#### Distraction

Overly zealous play aggression, sexual aggression, and most Territorial/Dominance Aggression can be dealt with effectively by distracting the cats and redirecting their energies toward play with a toy. Here are some ideas:

- Clap your hands, then say "No!" or "Time Out!" in a loud voice.
- Blow a whistle or sound an air horn (I can't imagine always having one available, but for ongoing problems it wouldn't hurt.)
- Hiss loudly. This is in imitation of their mother cat, a lesson cats remember well into adulthood. It can work effectively along with scruffing, described below.
- Provide the aggressor cat with a large stuffed toy, such as a teddy bear. Keep it aside as his own personal "surrogate victim," and throw it to him to redirect his attention away from his feline victim (after getting his attention).
- After you've gotten their attention, bring out an interactive toy, such as Da Bird, to redirect all that energy.

#### Physical Intervention

As mentioned before, never physically intervene between two cats locked in combat. However, there are times (during pauses between attacks, with less violent fighting, or during sexual aggression) where one form of physical intervention is extremely effective: that of scruffing.

Scruffing is performed by grasping the loose skin at the scruff of the neck of the aggressor cat, then gently, but firmly, pushing him down toward the floor. "Gently" is the optimum word here. Never use scruffing as punishment, but rather as a form of discipline.

Scruffing is a close approximation of the actions a mother cat will take with a unruly kitten. You can accompany scruffing with loud hissing, to reinforce the memory. The aggressor cat will immediately relax into a subservient posture, and may even roll over slightly. No doubt during this scruffing activity, the victim cat will beat feet away from the scene. Once you are sure the aggressor has calmed down, release him and talk to him quietly. A few gentle strokes will be appropriate at this time, much as a mother cat would lick and groom the kitten she has just disciplined.

Another form of physical intervention is separation, which may be necessary when a series of fights has occurred between two cats, or in the case of redirected aggression. Assign a "time out" room for the aggressor cat, and allow the victim the rest of the house. Separation can take place in as short as an hour or two, or as long as a day or two. Some cats living with forum members have needed separation for as long as several months, but most of them have eventually come to their own form of living peacefully together.

### **Medicinal Intervention**

If all else fails, you may have to resort to medication for the aggressor cat and/or the victim. Your own veterinarian can prescribe for your cat, or you may seek out the services of a veterinarian specializing in behavioral problems. Typical meds include:

- Amitriptylline = Sometimes prescribed for the aggressor cat to calm down his aggressive tendencies.
- Buspirone or Valium= These are both anti-anxiety meds, and may be prescribed for the victim cat, or in the case of redirected aggression, for both cats involved.
- Non-Prescriptive Aids = Many holistic remedies are available for stress or fear that accompanies aggression by another cat. Check my listing here of Natural Remedies for Stress. Two other readily available "OTC" aids are:
  - Feliway Plug-In = Although not actively marketed for this purpose, this pheromone-based product has been cited anecdotally as helping calm the atmosphere between aggressive feline housemates. Feliway was formulated to closely approximate the "friendly" facial pheromones cats use to mark their territory. The Feliway Comfort Zone Plug-In plugs into an electrical socket and diffuses the pheromone throughout a room. It is available online, and in most pet supply stores.
  - Bach's Flower Essences, particularly Rescue Remedy are widely used for stressful situations. A drop or two in the cats' water dish each day may have a calming effect on your combatants. Flower essences are available in some pet supply stores and in many health food stores.

Chances are that your household will rarely be troubled with severe aggression problems. By keeping your eyes open to potential rivalry, intervening when necessary, and by providing regular exercise with interactive toys, your cats will enjoy peaceful companionship for years.