

tame Anxiety

**BOTH YOURS
and YOUR KITTY'S**

Casey E. Christopher

Relax into a more peaceful life by identifying the culprit and taking steps to resolve the problem. **BY MARY SCHWAGER**

Everyone usually looks forward to a vacation, but when Kate McGarr starts packing, she's filled with trepidation when her cat, Bodhi, sees her suitcase and appears anxious.

"He knows he'll have some time I'm not here," Kate says. "He gets this look like he's worried. He'll go into my luggage and nuzzle into my clothing. He's mopey."

Though Kate always arranges the best in-home care for Bodhi, she returns a bit stressed because that's when he seeks what she laughingly calls revenge. "He will wake me up all night long," Kate says. "He will jump on top of me, knock things off my bureau. It's like he's mad because I went away."

While mental health experts tell us to embrace change, cat behaviorists say most kitties don't welcome those words of wisdom.

"Cats are creatures of habit," says Jennifer Van Valkenburg, a certified feline trainer and owner of Natural Healthy Cats. "They don't like change. It can be a new baby in the house, a new person, a new pet or construction."

Deviations in your cat's home are among the top causes of feline anxiety, but other factors can ratchet up the tension for you and your cat. Do you know the signs of a stressed-out kitty? Can your cat sense if you're anxious, too?

SIGNS OF STRESS

Sometimes it's obvious your cat is upset. She may scratch furniture, potty outside the litter box, hiss or make those low-pitched, demon-like noises to show discontent. Your cat could even develop obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

"They may over-groom and cause hair loss and trauma to the skin," says Dr. Bruce Kornreich, director of the Cornell Feline Health Center at Cornell University. "They may have diarrhea. Their appetite may decrease. They may lose weight."

Your cat may also exhibit more subtle behavior. "They may become less active," Dr. Kornreich says. "They may tremble. They may hide."

COMMON STRESSORS

Finding what's causing the changes in your cat is essential. Medical issues are a top cat stress culprit.

"Cats with hyperthyroidism may demonstrate behaviors suggesting stress," Dr. Kornreich says. "Stress can

Is your kitty stressed?

If you encounter any of the following, your cat may be feeling some anxiety.

- ✓ scratching furniture
- ✓ potting outside the litter box
- ✓ hissing
- ✓ low-pitched noises of unhappiness
- ✓ over-grooming
- ✓ diarrhea
- ✓ decrease in appetite
- ✓ less active
- ✓ trembling
- ✓ hiding
- ✓ spraying

also be caused by things that cause chronic pain, such as arthritis or advanced dental disease.”

Of course, putting your cat in her carrier and heading to the veterinarian leads to another well-known cause of feline anxiety: the animal hospital.

“There are unfamiliar smells at the veterinarian,” Jennifer says. “There are usually a lot of other animals under stress. It’s hard for us to communicate, ‘This is for your health.’”

Thunderstorms, boredom, not being fed enough (being hangry), seeing other animals outside your home and problems with animals in your home can all result in feline agitation. Cat cohabitation conflicts are a common issue.

“If resources aren’t plentiful and duplicated in each animal’s territory in the house, they may be competing over things like food, water, litter boxes, perching, napping and hiding spots, even people,” says Marci Koski, PhD, a certified feline behavior and training consultant, and owner of Feline Behavior Solutions.

And cats behaving badly can be a top cause of stress for you.

CAT PARENT STRESSORS

Cats not using the litter box is one of the top calls trainers get from panicked kitty parents — cats peeing and pooping on beds, couches, bathtubs and laundry baskets.

The stakes can be high when potty problems get out of control. Dr. Koski has helped couples where one spouse is on the verge of threatening: It’s the cat or me!

“I have a client who has a cat spraying throughout the home,” Dr. Koski says. “She does not want her husband to know. They just got new furniture. She cleans up the cat’s urine as soon as she finds it. She’s afraid that if her husband finds out, he will make her get rid of the cat.”

You may even stress about the same issues your cat does, like traveling and going to the veterinarian.

Then there are the financial anxieties: paying for medical bills, medications, tests, food, training or replacing furniture your cat ruins.

CATS SENSE YOUR ANXIETY

If you’re stressed, your cat might pick up on that, making the situation worse.

“There are some studies that suggest cats can recognize sadness, depression and anxiety in people, either by visually observing them, hearing them or both,” Dr. Kornreich says.

Researchers continue to study this area, but Dr. Kornreich says cats may change how they act in response to their owners’ behavior.

“Anecdotal evidence suggests cats can and will modify their behavior when they recognize these negative emotions in their owners,” he says.

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Cats may even realize what is stressing you out. “They are good at picking up associations,” Dr. Koski says. “If they see their people more stressed when another cat is around, they associate the other cat with the stress and the humans being nervous. It reinforces a negative association with that other cat.”

STRESSED OUT? WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

If you’ve got a level five CAT-egory stress storm brewing in your house, remain calm, try these tips and get professional help.

1 Make a veterinary appointment to ensure your cat has no underlying medical issues. Some veterinarians make house calls if your cat gets anxious going to the animal hospital.

There are veterinary practices taking proactive steps to minimize feline stress during visits, and there are a number of ways a vet’s office can significantly decrease a cat’s anxiety.

“Some animal hospitals even have separate entrances and waiting rooms for cats and dogs,” Dr. Kornreich says. “But it’s important to realize that veterinarians don’t have to alter their physical space to minimize feline anxiety.”

2 Contact a trainer or behaviorist to come in, assess the situation and give you steps to take (if your cat has no medical issues).

3 Try to relax. “I always say, if the cats see you as being more relaxed, they’re going to be more relaxed,” Dr. Koski says.

4 Give your cat something constructive to do. “Enrichment puzzles and feeder toys are my favorite things,” Jennifer says. “They satisfy their instinctual need and make them feel secure. ‘I’m a good hunter. I hunted food for myself. I am safe.’”



Alzoo Calming Diffuser Kit for Cats. \$19.99; amazon.com



KarmaCat Teaser Fish toy. \$9.95; dharma-dog-karmacat.com

Though Kate knows she will have a sleepless night when she gets home from a trip, knowing why Bodhi is likely stressed helps her understand both of their anxiety.

He is a rescue cat and didn’t always have the best human mom as he does now. A cat sitter is a change Bodhi is not pleased about. But Kate wishes Bodhi knew how much she dislikes being apart, too.

“He’s very sensitive, and I’m his person,” Kate says. “When I’m on vacation, I’m showing everybody pictures of my cat. I always miss him.” 🐟



Mary Schwager, “Watchdog Mary,” is a television and print journalist. She has won 17 Emmy awards for investigative and consumer reporting and several honors from the Cat Writers’ Association of America. You can find her at watchdogmary.com