

Cat Behavior Tips

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
A New Way of Thinking About Cats	5
Selecting a Cat or Kitten	7
Introducing a Cat or Kitten to the Home.....	8
Moving a Cat to a New Home.....	9
Neutering.....	10
Indoor or Outdoor Cat	11
Kitten and the Litterbox	12
Adult Cat and the Litterbox.....	13
Scratching the Furniture.....	15
Declawing	16
Jumping on the Counter	17
Urine Spraying.....	18
Chewing Dangerous Objects	19
Scratching and Biting.....	20
Aggressive Acting Kitten	21
Excessive Licking	22
Fleas	23
Introducing a Cat or Kitten to Another Cat.....	24
Introducing a New Baby to a Cat.....	25
The Shy and Fearful Cat.....	26
Preparing for the Veterinarian.....	27
Finicky Eater.....	28
Wild Behavior	29
Excessive Crying	30
Lethargy	31
Traveling with a Cat	32
The Aging Cat.....	33
Suggested Reading.....	34
About the Author.....	35

Introduction

The objective of this book is to give you a quick and easy overview of the most common cat behavior problems and their solutions. A more detailed description of training procedures can be found in any of the books in the "Suggested Reading" list.

My goal is to help you understand why your cat is behaving the way she is and to give you ideas on how to change unwanted behavior. You will notice as you read that I frequently warn of the unfortunate effects from using any form of punishment as a modifier of behavior. The only way you can build a bond of mutual trust between you and your cat is for you to praise good behavior whenever it is displayed. A cat learns to repeat behavior that is rewarded with praise and/or food tidbits. A cat learns to be shy or aggressive when its behavior is punished!

Cats are easily trained by the use of food tidbits as lures and rewards. Start by rewarding correct behavior every time it occurs. Then, slowly begin substituting praise for food rewards each time correct behavior is displayed. Intermittently use food as a reward; this will "fix the learning" and will prevent your cat from becoming a beggar!

The adoption of two cats will solve many behavior problems. Two cats play together, providing exercise for each other. They take turns grooming and keeping each other company. Contentment is one cat having another as a companion and you as their caregiver!

Behavior problems are quite often medically related. Before trying to solve a behavior problem, make sure that your cat is healthy. Establish a relationship with a good veterinarian.

Please consider adopting your cat from an animal shelter. Then, get her altered as soon as possible so that you will not contribute to the horrendous feline overpopulation. A companion cat need not be a purebred to give you many years of love and affection. If you must select a purebred, acquire your adoption from a responsible breeder who will guarantee her health and proper socialization.

I have avoided using the term "owner" in referring to you. You are a cat's protector, friend, guardian, and caregiver. Too many people who "own" a cat think they can "sell her" or "give it away" as soon as she misbehaves. Adoption and protecting a cat is a commitment to the lifetime of that cat!

Guardianship of a cat will cost you a little money. Did you think you would get fifteen to twenty years of love free?

Pet supply stores have lots of items to help you solve behavior problems, from vibration alarms and flea control products to harnesses and ready-to-grow plants for chewing. If they do not have what you need, look through any popular cat magazine, and you will find a variety of advertised products.

Throughout this book, I refer to your cat as "her." My apology to you caregivers with male cats! To be fair, in my book on dog behavior problems, I refer to your dog as "him." I have properly used the term "neutering" in this book as gender neutral. To neuter a cat is to spay her and castrate him.

After having been the guardian of several cats in my lifetime, the best advice I could give to you, if this is your first cat, is RELAX! Accept the fact that a cat is going to jump up on the counter once in a while, leave a few hairs on the furniture, deposit a dead mouse at your feet, and drink out of the toilet. Keep a patient perspective! A cat will also curl up on your lap when you really need someone to love, and a cat will wrestle with her tail under the dining room table, giving you lots of giggles. Your cat will give you more companionship than you ever dreamed and will ask for little in return!

A New Way of Thinking About Cats

It has long been thought that cats are independent and therefore untrainable. There are some people who think that cats are sneaky and untrustworthy. Actually, they are neither! They are just cats acting like cats.

Cats are intelligent, sensitive animals who are completely dependent on their human caregivers. These qualities make them very trainable. In fact, cats have been trained to do certain "tricks" in television commercials and movies. Cats are trained to help the hearing impaired by responding to smoke alarms, doorbells, and telephones. I know of a blind person who is using a cat as a guide in her home. The cat meows a warning just before the person is about to bump into something. Cats can even be taught to use the toilet. Now, if we could only get them to flush it!

The cat's popularity in the United States has now surpassed that of dogs. There are good reasons for this. They are good friends and companions. They feel good to the touch, greet us upon arriving, and demand a minimum of attention. Working people find cats easier to leave at home because, when left alone, they exhibit fewer behavior problems than dogs.

A hallmark of feline behavior is independence and individuality. That is one reason we like cats. They are very much like us! Also, like us, they can be taught to behave according to our wishes. They have certain innate needs such as scratching, jumping onto high places, cleanliness of toilet, play and exercise, cuddling, and being included in conversations. As stewards of these pets, we must accept these needs and provide for their expression. It does not make sense to spank a cat for scratching the furniture. A cat needs to scratch. It is our responsibility, therefore, to provide an appropriate place to scratch and to take some time for kitty education.

Cats are creatures of territorial security. Changes in their environment result in behavior problems. For example, a cat that consistently uses her litterbox may cease to do so while the house is being remodeled or painted. An outgoing cat may become shy and hide upon the introduction of a new pet or person to the home. Most problems caused by environmental changes are self-correcting after a time.

Many cat misbehavior problems are medically related. You must be prepared to consult a veterinarian if your cat suddenly stops using the litterbox, runs and hides at the least little bit of confusion, appears sullen or without energy, or uncharacteristically becomes aggressive.

A cat's character is largely a result of her breeding and early environmental experiences. A cat's personality is partly reflective of ours. For example, if I have a quiet, easy-going manner, my cat will too. If I am a rambunctious, busy, highly expressive person, my cat will reflect that behavior. Like children our cats are a reflection of ourselves. Many of the behavior problems we have with our cats are really within us. For example, to scold a cat for bringing a mouse into the house is really our own reaction to fear or revulsion. To the cat, it is a perfectly natural act. She is a predator. She feels most comfortable returning the prey to her den. Here, she can share it with us without worry of other predators taking it away.

As a guardian, protector and friend of an adopted cat, you need to accept and understand your cat's needs. You must accept the responsibility of teaching your cat and realize that the majority of behavior problems are either medically related or the result of your own ineptness! We inadvertently teach a cat bad behavior. Why does a cat sit at the refrigerator

and cry? She has learned that behavior because she is reinforced with food after the refrigerator is opened. Food is a good reinforcer of behavior.

The new way to think about cats is to eliminate all forms of punishment. Punishment in the form of hitting, screaming, or chasing increase a cat's stress and will likely result in more misbehavior. Punishment after an act has occurred has no meaning to a cat. For example, greeting a cat upon entering the house by rubbing her nose in the mess we have just found teaches her to associate this punishment with our return rather than with the mess. Maybe this is why cats appear independent and aloof. They are afraid of what a human is capable of doing to them!

The new way to think about cats is to reward a cat for doing the right thing. Show a cat what to do, tell her what you want, take her to where you want her to be, and expect her to understand. Then, when the right behavior does occur, whether it is because you have encouraged it or whether the cat inadvertently did it, praise her by saying, "GOOD KITTY!" and follow this with a coveted food treat. The keys to training a cat are praise and reward. A bonding will occur with this method, and your cat will not misbehave because a special love and trust will have been established.

Selecting a Cat or Kitten

You must first decide whether or not you want a kitten or a cat. There are advantages and disadvantages to each. A kitten will adjust more easily to your lifestyle than will an adult cat. But, an adult cat will already have gone through that rambunctious, crazy period. It is easier to recognize the personality type, e.g., shy or outgoing, if the cat is half-grown or older. The most important consideration is whether or not the cat is healthy and psychologically undamaged.

What do you look for in a cat? Many white, blue-eyed cats are born deaf. Longhaired cats, for the most part, are calmer and more docile than short-haired. Long-haired cats usually cause more allergies. We could go on and on.

Whatever cat you select, you must first determine your own needs and level of commitment. A deaf cat, for example, will make an excellent pet but may take special training.

Whatever the breed, pure or mixed, any cat will be a good pet if you have been careful in your selection and are determined to teach her through praise and reward rather than through punishment.

It is best not to choose the runt of the litter. Too often, they do not get enough nourishment, having to fight brothers and sisters for a place at the lunch counter. This sometimes results in health and behavior problems. Also, many runts are excessively aggressive, learned from fighting for their rightful place or, on the other hand, they can turn into shy adults.

Choose a cat or kitten that is healthy. Choose one that is weaned no earlier than eight weeks. Research shows that the longer a kitten stays with her mother, up to sixteen weeks, the more sociable she is with other cats.

Sociability is an important factor in selecting a cat or kitten. It is important for a kitten to be socialized to people. This is accomplished by the caregiver, taking each kitten out of the litter on a regular basis and letting her be handled by a variety of humans. At a very early age, a kitten should be socialized to dogs so that when she is an adult she will know what a dog is all about and will not be frightened by one.

If you are a person allergic to cats, select one with short hair and then spend time each week brushing and combing her. There are cat shampoos which will render the cat's hair allergy free. A daily rubdown with a towel soaked in distilled water will remove the dried saliva (dander) that causes allergies.

In testing a cat for her sociability to people, pick her up and see if she is content to let you hold her. If she struggles to get free, she may not be a good choice. Pick her up and put her next to your face. If she purrs spontaneously, she is contented to be with humans. Put her on the floor and see if she stays close and wants to be with you or if she runs away.

Introducing a Cat or Kitten to the Home

Before taking your new adoptee home and risking exposing her to any infectious disease, take her to a veterinarian for a thorough health check-up, including a test for feline leukemia, de-worming, inoculations and, if appropriate, neutering.

Plan on staying home with your new kitty for several days, helping her get over the stress of the visit to the veterinarian and the move from her previous home. Give her at least three weeks to adapt completely to her new environment. Keep her in the house during this three week period and give her a chance to investigate and get used to the household routine.

Put approximately three inches of litterbox filler in a plastic litterbox and position it in a private place where there is little traffic. Clean the litter every day and completely change it every third day. If you plan to use one of the new powdered clay litter products, you filter out only the "lumps" each day. Gently place your kitty in the box, and do not punish her for having an occasional accident. Punishment increases stress and, in turn, increases the likelihood of your cat not using the litterbox.

During the housebreaking period, feed your new kitty a dry kibbled food and water. The change in the kind of food, going from the previous home to the shelter, and then to your home, may cause bowel problems for a few days. Be patient, and do not feed her table scraps no matter how much she begs!

Provide play toys like ping pong balls, paper tied to the end of a string hanging from door handles, rubber balls, wands with ribbon on the end, and paper bags into which she can crawl. Also, make sure she has a place, preferably up high, to sit and look out the window during the daytime.

Most cats will want to sleep with you, which is fine. If you do not want this, place a soft bedding material in a warm place and dial the radio to an easy listening music station.

Teach your kitty to use a scratching post.

If your kitty is left for long periods of time by herself, adopt another kitty for companionship and exercise. Two cats are better than one.

To lengthen your cat's life, get her neutered and keep her inside away from outside hazards like dogs, cars, and ticks.

Never physically punish your kitty by hitting or chasing her. Even screaming will produce a scared kitty that will run and hide when she sees you. If you want to teach her, catch her doing something right and reinforce the behavior with a scratch under her chin followed by "Good Kitty!"

Moving a Cat to a New Home

Some cats are quite traumatized by a move to a new home; others take it in stride. It is best, however, to prepare for this usually upsetting time in a cat's life.

Since cats are very territorial, moving one to a new territory can be terrifying, especially if the new territory is inhabited by a number of other cats.

The first thing to do to help make your cat comfortable about the move is to clean the new house thoroughly if it has been lived in before, especially if other cats have lived there. Then, unpack your belongings and put familiar furniture in place.

Position the cat's litterbox in a quiet, out of the way spot. As soon as your cat is taken to the new house, show her the litterbox. Do the same for the new feeding area. If your cat has a bed or favorite bedding material, lay it in place and show her where that is, too. Let her wander the house, looking and smelling.

If your cat chooses not to eat for a few days, or hides out somewhere, just let her be. Sooner or later, she will be comfortable enough to resume normal living.

It will be best to keep your cat in the house for at least three weeks. If she has been an outside cat, once she starts going out you can get rid of the litterbox.

The first adventure outside should be under your control, preferably with kitty on a leash and harness. Or, at the very least, leave the door open and go out with your cat. If she gets frightened or chased, she can run into the house. The key is to give her a chance to get familiar with the interior of the house as a safe haven before letting her outside.

If you have not taught your cat to come when she is called, do it now. Disregard that "I'll take a message and get back to you" look. Start the training in the house. Call, "Here Kitty, Kitty, Kitty." When she comes, reward her with her favorite food treat. Do this ten or twelve times. Then, when your kitty goes outside and you are not sure where she is, just call, and she will come running. Periodically reward her for coming, and the learning will be fixed forever.

Neutering

Since neutering requires surgery, it is emotionally traumatic. Handled properly, your cat will recover quickly.

Let us first dispel the myths surrounding the neutering of cats. Cats do not get fat and lazy after being neutered. They get that way because of overeating and lack of exercise. Cats do not become more satisfactory pets after they have had sexual intercourse, had their first heat, or given birth to a litter of kittens.

The cat population is exploding with an estimated ten to fifteen million put to death every year in animal control centers. Neutering is essential to curb this holocaust. There are no arguments against neutering and many in favor.

It is best to have your cat neutered before she has developed bad habits like spraying, fighting, and roaming. Neutering your cat will not change her personality. Personality is determined by genetics, early socialization, and the bond you create with your cat. Neutering will help your cat live a healthier, happier, less stressful life.

A cat will usually become less aggressive after neutering. She will smell better, be more sociable and calm, and will be less inclined to mark territory with urine. From a selfish, human standpoint, she will be a more pleasant and devoted pet with nothing else on her mind other than to be with and please you!

Research shows neutered cats have less incidence of disease including mammary gland tumors, uterine and testicular cancer, just to name a few. A neutered cat will be happier as an indoor cat and, therefore, subject to less exposure to outside hazards such as external parasites, cars, dogs, and diseases.

After having your cat neutered, give her a few weeks for the hormones to dissipate from her body. Keep her inside and quiet. Do not let her roughhouse until the incision is completely healed. Use shredded paper in the litterbox to avoid the possibility of infection from fecal grains of cat-box filler.

Consult with your veterinarian to determine the proper age for this operation. Generally, it is about six to nine months although early neutering is becoming a more accepted practice. Older cats can be neutered with good behavioral results. If your cat has already developed a spraying habit and the neutering does not seem to help, see the chapter on urine spraying.

Indoor or Outdoor Cat

In the best of all possible worlds, a cat would be happiest having access to both the indoors and outdoors. Cats love the security and warmth of being inside. They also love the sights, smells, and excitement of the outside. Today's outside world, however, can be dangerous for a cat.

As your cat sits by the door crying to go outside, you may feel guilty, as if depriving her of a fulfilled life. But, since we are stewards of our pets, we must not let them run freely through the neighborhood. If your cat cries to go outside, just say, "NO." Cats live longer and healthier lives if kept inside. Exchange your guilt for the assurance that you are extending your feline companion's life!

The outdoor stray you have just adopted may drive you crazy. After all, she only knows the outside world. A great deal of patience and lots of her favorite food will eventually bring her around. Besides, there are many good reasons for keeping your cat indoors:

- unwanted pregnancies
- extreme weather conditions
- catnapping for re-sale or research
- poisoning
- cars
- diseases and parasites
- injuries from other animals, and
- being picked up as a stray and, for lack of identification, being euthanized at an animal shelter.

There are several things that can be done to keep your indoor cat happy and healthy. Change her physical environment by screening off a porch, giving her a safe outdoor haven. Place a large wire cage up against a door leading to a patio or deck. The opening of the door, or of a swinging pet door, releases her into the cage. Provide a window perch so that she can look outside. Special platforms which hang on the windowsill can be purchased.

Get another cat! Two cats will exercise, entertain, and keep each other company. Have plenty of toys around the house - string with paper tied to the end hanging from doorknobs, ping pong balls, or a catnip mouse tied to the end of a fishing line. Cast out the line and reel in the mouse. Cats love this game of chase and catch, and your neighbors, as well, will be entertained.

Provide a carpeted kitty condo for your cats to climb on, sharpen claws, and sleep in. Two cats will also enjoy chasing each other up, over, and through this condo.

Be sure to get rid of poisonous house plants. A cat will chew and sometimes swallow them which may result in illness or death. Provide a pot of grass for your cat to nibble if she is so inclined. There are ready-to-grow plants available at most pet supply stores.

The key to keeping an indoor cat healthy and happy is to keep her well-exercised. Lots of playtime with you and/or another cat will take care of this need. Believe it or not, some cats can be taken for a walk on a leash. Have patience, and take your time in helping your cat get used to the idea of walking on a leash. Many cats enjoy walks with their human friends.

Kitten and the Litterbox

Each newborn kitten comes with the instinctual knowledge that bowel and bladder elimination must be deposited in a hole dug in the earth and then covered up.

All that one needs to do to train a kitten is to provide the earth and show the kitten where it is. The kitten will take care of the rest!

Start out with a litterbox large enough to accommodate your cat as an adult. This eliminates the need to change boxes which can sometimes be a factor in its future disuse. Pour in an absorbent cat-box filler about three to four inches deep. I like a scented filler that does not have a lot of fine powder in it. The new powdered clay fillers are very good. The advantage to using powdered clay is that you remove only the balls of matter each day and replace the lost litter occasionally. If you use regular filler, clean it every day, and completely change it every three or four days.

It is important to place the litterbox in a semi-private location such as under a table or inside a closet with the door partially open. Cats like their privacy.

As soon as you bring your kitten home, show her the location of the litterbox by placing her in it. She will probably jump out immediately. That's okay. Several times those first few days, place her in the litter box. She will soon find out that that is the only place where she will be able to dig a hole for elimination purposes. For the first several days, every time she does get into the litterbox, praise her with "Good Kitty!"

If your kitten does not use the litterbox after this procedure, have her thoroughly checked over by a veterinarian. If she is healthy, but still insists on going in places other than the litterbox, clean these areas with soap and water and then overspray them with a solution of 25 percent white vinegar mixed with 75 percent water. This will remove the ammonia smell which might encourage her to go back to these same spots. If she is returning to the same spot, place the litterbox there. If this does not work, confine her to one room, such as bathroom, for a week. Place her food, water, and bed in one end of the room and her litterbox in the other. Once she has started using it again, you can let her roam freely.

Adult Cat and the Litterbox

If you have just adopted an adult cat and want to train her to use the litter box, start from the beginning, following the instructions in the previous chapter. If you are the guardian of an adult cat who has stopped using the litterbox, then look for medical or behavioral causes. Fortunately, most behavioral litterbox problems are self-correcting. It usually requires confining the cat to a single room with her bed, food, and water at one end, and the litterbox at the other. The cat will begin using the litterbox within a few days. Before trying this extreme measure, however, consider the many conditions which will cause a cat to quit using the box. These conditions must be altered if a permanent change is desired.

The first problem to consider is the medical one. If your cat is defecating out of the litterbox, consider having her checked for blocked anal glands. If she is constantly licking in the anal area, scooting along the floor, or crying, see a veterinarian. A cat may also have diarrhea which may be causing feces to stick to her fur and drop off later outside of the box. Diarrhea may be caused by an improper diet, hairballs, parasites, eating spoiled food, or an illness. If you suspect any of these as the problem, see a veterinarian.

Indiscriminate urination can be caused by a bladder infection, diabetes, old age incontinence, or arthritis. Some of the symptoms to look for besides urination outside of the box are: increased frequency of urination, decreased volume of urine, increased thirst, crying, obvious distress during urination, enlarged abdomen, and blood in the litterbox. Of course, any change of personality is a possible sign of illness. See a veterinarian immediately if you suspect a bladder blockage. This is a life threatening situation!

There are many factors to consider if your cat's discontinued use of the litterbox is a behavioral problem. Changing the brand of litter or the size, shape, and depth of the litterbox can cause some cats to refuse its use. If you have just adopted an adult cat, this could be her problem until she becomes accustomed to the new litter and box. Experiment first with litterbox filler. Then try a different litterbox.

The stress is tremendous to a new adoptee going from her old familiar territory, then to a shelter, and now to your home. It takes a cat from three to eight weeks to become fully adjusted to a new environment, and this includes consistent use of the litterbox. Be patient, and do not punish your cat by hitting her, rubbing her nose in the feces or urine, or scolding her. Cats are very clean by nature and the last thing a cat wants is to soil her territory outside of her toilet. A cat knows what a litterbox is for, and she knows how to hit that tiny little target hole that she just created!

The anxiety of being given up for adoption can cause some cats to release stress by defecating or urinating wherever they feel secure, and it may not be in that brand new litterbox.

Cats will discontinue using a litterbox that is full. It is best to clean it daily. With more than one cat, it is a good idea to have a litterbox for each.

A new adoptee might be accustomed to going in a box that has shredded paper, sand, sawdust, powdered clay, or some other substrate. Experiment with different substrates. The depth of the substrate can be a critical factor for some cats. Some like it deep, some shallow. If your cat urinates on a certain rug, cut out a piece of rug, place it in the litterbox along with some litter, and gradually reduce the size of the piece of rug while at the same time increasing the amount of litter. If your cat is urinating on a cold surface like the stove top or sink, see a veterinarian. This could be a medical problem.

If you have just moved into a new home, and your cat started urinating outside of the box, you might suspect the mastic used on some tiles and carpets. Some have an ammonia smell, which is the odor of urine, encouraging some cats to urinate on these surfaces. You might also suspect that the previous owners had a cat who missed the litterbox.

If your cat has an accident, say nothing, clean it up, and spray over it with a 25 percent white vinegar and 75 percent water solution. This will mask the ammonia odor and discourage kitty from returning to the same spot again.

Some cats can be stressed enough to temporarily discontinue using the litterbox if a new baby, pet, or significant other moves into the home. The loss of a significant other, including a companion animal pet, can temporarily break a cat's litterbox routine. These problems are usually self-correcting.

Cats like their litterboxes placed in a semi-private location. Inside a closet with the door slightly open or under a table away from the main traffic pattern are good places. I know one person who keeps it in the shower stall. Experiment with locations. Put the box in a place that seems comfortable to your cat.

Any disturbance in a cat's routine or change in her territory, such as remodeling or painting, may cause her to temporarily discontinue use of the litterbox.

It is important not to feed table scraps to a cat. Feed her a quality food. If irregular eating habits are creating house soiling problems, feed her twice a day and put the food away to eliminate in-between snacking. This would also benefit an overweight cat.

Remember, do not punish a cat for any behavior problems. A cat views chasing, kicking, hitting, and screaming as punishment. Physical punishment creates stress which can result in litterbox problems.

Scratching the Furniture

You have chosen to include in your family a wonderful friend and companion, the cat. Now, you must accept the fact that a cat has an innate need to use her claws to scratch.

A cat will scratch for three reasons. She will scratch to hone or sharpen her claws, for these have always been her chief offensive and defensive weapons. She will scratch to stretch and tone her muscles. And, she will scratch to mark her territory.

You cannot eliminate the need a cat has for scratching. But you can teach a cat to scratch in an appropriate place. Scratching posts are good for this as are scratching materials hung from doorknobs, attached to walls, or lying flat on the floor. Posts are usually carpeted or wrapped with sisal rope. Flat scratching pads can be carpeted or covered with burlap or upholstery material. Some people have had success by bringing an alderwood log into the house!

Training sometimes requires more than one post. A scratching post should be placed close to where your cat usually sleeps, eats, or waits to go outside. Upon awakening, or after eating, a cat will usually place her front paws on something above her head, then extend her claws and pull like crazy. A scratching post should also be sturdy enough so as not to fall over when your cat pulls on it.

Carefully select the material on a scratching post. The fabric should not be a kind that makes it difficult for your cat to extract her claws.

Teaching your cat to use a scratching post or hanging scratching material can be accomplished in several ways. First of all, be sure to praise your cat every time you see her using her scratching post. A happy, "Good Kitty!" followed by a favorite food treat will reinforce this behavior. Drag a catnip mouse, or a piece of paper tied to a string, across the floor and let her "crawl" up the scratching post.

If she is scratching in an inappropriate place, gently lift her up and place her next to the scratching post and praise her if she uses it. Try sprinkling some catnip on the scratching post. This will have more effect on adult cats. Purchase a carpeted kitty condo in which your cat can sleep, wake up, stretch, and SCRATCH, too.

Most of all, do not punish your kitty for scratching the furniture by hitting, scolding or chasing her. Your cat will not understand all of the fuss over doing what comes naturally. Punishment will only build stress and create a fearful cat who may eventually socially withdraw or become aggressive toward you. The best thing is to have several places where kitty may scratch, especially close to sleeping areas and doors. Taping foil or plastic over the already inappropriately scratched area will discourage further scratching. Also, taping a tightly blown up balloon on the scratched furniture will negatively reinforce this as a scratching area if by chance she pops the balloon. You may want to use one of the new electronic devices which emits a high-pitched alarm whenever kitty approaches an off-limits scratching place.

Declawing

Cats get declawed because we humans have failed to teach them to use the scratching post. So, the furniture is being shredded, and you are wondering whether or not it would be a good idea to declaw your cat.

Cats have an innate need to scratch. They scratch because they need to clear off the old sheath to expose the new sharper claw that is underneath. They scratch as a way of stretching and toning their muscles. That is why it is a good idea to put one scratching post near the place where they usually sleep. Cats also scratch to mark their territory. Scratch marks on trees outside leave a small odor, declaring this as the cat's territory. They use their claws to groom themselves, and they use them for protection.

I discourage the declawing of cats for several reasons. Cats need their claws. Declawing is physically painful and, in some cases, psychologically damaging. If scratching-post training has failed, however, and the choice is getting rid of the cat or getting rid of the claws, I would think that any cat would choose the latter.

I realize there are people who may be elderly, ill, or disabled and are badly in need of a kitty companion. For them, training a cat to use appropriate scratching material may be difficult. Before considering declawing, however, be sure you have given scratching-post training a full and fair trial. If you decide to have your cat declawed, remove only the front claws. The rear claws can still be used for grooming and climbing.

Carefully choose an experienced veterinarian who has successfully performed this surgery before and one who has modern up-to-date anesthetic equipment.

Be sure you are committed to keeping your cat indoors because, after declawing, she will be unable to defend herself.

This operation will be traumatic for your cat, so expect her to act differently during the recovery period. Be patient and give her lots of love and attention for several weeks following the surgery. Discontinue use of a gravel-like litter. She may be reluctant to dig in this due to soreness or tenderness. I would advise using newspaper shreds or a similar commercial material. It digs easily, and you only have to remove the waste and add more filler rather than completely change the litter.

If your cat is not acting like her "old self" within a few weeks, take her back to the veterinarian and have her checked to see if proper healing took place or if there is a soreness that can be treated.

Jumping on the Counter

Cats love to jump. You would too, if you were a cat! They also like high places where they can view their territory from relative security. Cats are naturally curious, and there are a lot of interesting things on counter tops, including food. A one-time discovery of a food tidbit will become a powerful reinforcer for dozens of future explorations.

Your presence can affect a behavioral change if your cat insists on jumping on counters, cars, and furniture. When you are not at home, the only way to keep her from jumping on these things is to booby trap the place or to isolate her. The bottom line is: If you own a cat, you must accept and live with the fact that she will occasionally jump up on things.

Of course, it is best not to leave food on the top of counters or tables. This is just too tempting. It is much better to give your cat permission to jump up on specific high places. For example, my cat liked to sit on top of the washing machine in the kitchen next to the sink and watch me wash dishes. I gave her permission to jump up and sit there. Whenever she tried to move beyond that point to another part of the counter, I said, "NO," and blocked her way, forcing her to get back to the top of the washing machine. Also, I reinforced her staying there with a food tidbit. The key is to allow your cat to do what she innately needs to do but to limit her to a certain space.

Punishment in the form of yelling, chasing, hitting, or squirting water at a cat to force her down off the car or the furniture will only increase her stress and create more problems for you. A cat will become shy, sneaky, or aggressive after being punished. In other words, she will not trust you. The cat thinks to herself, "If she likes me, then why is she yelling at me for doing something natural like wanting to be on high place with her?"

The best way to teach your cat is to give her a verbal reprimand like "OFF!" followed by "Good Kitty!" when she has jumped off. If she jumps down quickly, give her a nice food treat followed by "Good Kitty." Sometimes a loud clap of the hands will be a sufficient reprimand.

Punishment which is administered by the environment, not by you, is very effective as illustrated in the following example. Put a couple of strips of doubleback tape on the counter. After a jump or two, she will be discouraged from that adventure. Pop a balloon in her presence, then tape several balloons to the counter, car, or furniture. Cats do not like loud noises and will associate the noise with the balloon and avoid the area. Spraying white vinegar on the counter top will keep some cats away. Place a layer of paper on the car with mousetraps set upside down and another layer of paper on top of the traps. When your cat jumps on the paper, the snapping of the traps will frighten her off, and after a few times she will not jump up again. Pyramid empty pop cans on a counter with food attached to the end of a string taped to a "key" can so that when she pulls on the baited string the cans some tumbling down. The new electronic vibration alarms work effectively for keeping cats off of counters and cars. In each of these instances, you do not need to be nearby for the learning to occur. When the environment teaches your cat, the bond between you and her is not broken!

Urine Spraying

First, it is important to understand the difference between spraying (urine marking) and indiscriminate urination. A cat who is not using the litterbox, who is urinating outside of the box, is usually motivated by a different set of circumstances. Urination of this kind is found in the form of a puddle on a horizontal surface. A cat who is spraying will usually urine-mark a vertical surface. This cat's urine will be running down a door or the side of a chair. There are many reasons why cats spray.

Cats are very territorial, and if they perceive their territory to be threatened, they will mark it as a warning to others. Unaltered cats tend toward more territorial marking than neutered cats. But neutered cats, male or female, will territorially mark, as well.

Cats will mark their territory by spraying if there is an unaltered male or a female in heat wandering the neighborhood. Spraying will most certainly occur if another cat is not introduced properly into the existing cat's home. Sometimes spraying will take place if there are too many cats in a household. How many are too many? That depends on the cats and how well they get along. For some cats, the addition of one more cat would be too many.

Cats may spray if they are in a stressful situation. This may be when a stranger enters the home such as a new baby or a new significant other. Stress may result when the house is being painted or remodeled. Sometimes, a new cat in the neighborhood staring through the window will produce enough stress to simulate your cat to urine-mark.

For temporary relief from this problem, your veterinarian can help by prescribing chemical therapy. In the meantime, in order to permanently eliminate spraying, you must discover and remove the motivation for your spraying cat's behavior. Usually, the spraying is hormonally driven, but not always. Therefore, sexually altering your cat may solve the problem. This will make her less territorial, hence no need for spraying. Your neighbors may be willing to alter their cats, as well.

You may have to play detective to discover what is causing stress in your kitty's life. If your kitty is being physically punished for any misbehavior, she will release the stress of this abuse by spraying, on you, your property, or whoever is administering the punishment.

This can be a difficult problem to solve. I worked with one client whose male cat was spraying. We played detective over a period of several days until we finally discovered that the onset of the spraying coincided with a time six months earlier when she decided to keep her kitty indoors. As soon as he was allowed to come and go as he pleased, the spraying stopped.

Chewing Dangerous Objects

There are medical as well as behavioral reasons why cats chew, lick, or eat non-food objects.

A kitten, just like a baby, will take everything into her mouth just out of curiosity. A swallowed marble, paper clip, poisonous plant, or rubber balloon can be lethal for a kitten. And, just like a baby, items that tempt a kitten must be put out of her reach, and she must be watched carefully.

It is thought, though not scientifically proven, that an adult cat who persists on chewing and eating a non-food item may be lacking certain nutrients in her diet. It may be a vitamin imbalance. As a precaution, always choose a quality food for your cat, one recommended by your veterinarian.

A cat who chews and eats paper, wood, or leather may have internal parasites who are sucking certain nutrients out of her system. A cat who licks window panes, walls, or cement walkways may be anemic. Chronic intestinal problems and liver and kidney disease will sometimes cause a cat to eat non-food items. In all these situations, see your veterinarian immediately.

Some cats chew and eat non-food objects because they are just simply bored and need something to do. Provide more playtime.

A cat that chews or sucks on clothing – wool is a favorite of some cats, especially Siamese – may have been weaned too early. The wool sucking produces a smell similar to the wet fur around the mother's nipple. As long as this material is not being swallowed, let this cat have her security blanket. She may break herself one day or she may not. She can still be a wonderful companion.

Cats who chew electrical cords are flirting with danger. Cover these cords with duct tape. Coat them with one of the commercial bitter products or tabasco sauce to discourage chewing. A number of household plants are poisonous to cats. The worst among them are dieffenbachia which can cause temporary paralysis of the throat, and philodendron which can make a cat's throat and tongue swell enough to cause asphyxiation. Among the many varieties of other plants, some found outside, are azaleas, ivy, mistletoe, most bulbs, buttercups, chrysanthemums, crocus, holly, lily of the valley, marigold, potato, rhubarb, sweet peas, and wisteria.

You can discourage your cat from eating your household plants by baiting a leaf or two with tabasco sauce. You might try popping a balloon near your cat followed by hanging a few balloons from the plant she has been chewing. The best thing to do for your inside cat is to grow a garden for her to chew on. Plant catnip or wheat and parsley. You can purchase "ready-to-grow" gardens from your local pet supply store.

In the long run, the best way to train your cat is by giving her a verbal "NO" for chewing and swallowing anything but her food. Follow this reprimand with a food treat and praise: "Good Kitty!"

Scratching and Biting

A cat who is acting aggressively may be offensively play fighting or she may be defensively protecting herself. How can we know the difference?

A cat that attacks, bites, and scratches without warning and does not quit until the human has a fit, is acting offensively. She is acting out predatory play behavior or practicing killing maneuvers on live prey - you! She may act like this because of boredom and inactivity. In other words, she is just releasing pent-up energy. A quiet cat that suddenly explodes into activity, including biting and scratching, is really just playing, albeit a little too roughly.

Some cats can be overexcited, engaging in rough play, by excessive pleasurable stimulation such as continual petting. There is a fine line in a cat's mind between enjoyable petting and irritable handling. When your cat scratches or bites during play, stop petting.

If a cat is acting aggressively in an offensive, play attack, biting mode, try distraction by dragging a catnip mouse or yarn ball tied to a string in front of her. If this does not work, then a quick spritz in the face with water from a water pistol, a loud "NO," or clapping your hands together is usually effective. When she stops the unwanted behavior, give her plenty of praise and a nice food tidbit. If she runs, call her, and when she comes, say, "Good kitty!" and give her a nice food tidbit. It is important always to follow a reprimand with praise.

Provide toys as an outlet for pent-up energy.

A cat that attacks, bites, and scratches without warning and then retreats is, in all likelihood, acting out of fear and therefore defending herself. There are medical reasons for fear defensiveness. For example, if the cat has a hidden wound or a tumor and was then petted, she might react to the pain. Unaltered cats are sometimes more aggressive as are cats in heat or a new mother protecting her litter. Sometimes, a nutritional deficiency or an illness can result in crankiness. If you suspect your cat is acting aggressively in a defensive manner, it would be a good idea for you to get her to a veterinarian. Even something as simple as walking across the rug, reaching down and petting our cat, can cause her to bite or scratch you. You might have unknowingly given her a static electric shock. Some cats have had a traumatic visit with a veterinarian and will develop a fear of men (most veterinarians are male). Consequently, she will attack all men. Cats are creatures of security and comfort, and, if their personal space (bed) is violated, or if they are touched too roughly or touched in a sensitive spot, they will react out of fear with defensive aggression.

If a cat is acting aggressively in a defensive, biting, scratching mode, it is a sure sign that she is acting out of fear. It could be that she was not properly socialized as a kitten. It will take time, but, by arming your guests with a good food tidbit and letting your cat approach, she will learn, in time, not to fear others. If a cat has been abused, she will learn to be defensive. Hitting, chasing, or screaming constitute abuse. Cessation of any form of punishment and consistent praise for good behavior will, in time, re-establish the bond, and the aggressiveness will diminish.

Aggressive Acting Kitten

I use the term "aggressive acting" because the roughhousing engaged in by a kitten is all purely offensive. Although the kitten will get carried away using her teeth and claws, she is basically acting out a predatory play behavior. She is practicing her stalk, attack, and killing maneuvers on you! A kitten acts this way because she has boundless energy. Of course, in between these energy bursts, there are those angelic catnaps. Consider adopting two kittens. They would release their energy on each other and not on you.

If you have wisely selected your new kitten, you have chosen one that was properly socialized. Proper socialization means that when your kitten was still nursing, the owner took her out of the litter to be held and handled by all sorts of people - big and small, male and female. The kitten learns early on that people are gentle, fun to touch, and occasionally have great food treats.

It is important for you to expose your new kitten to all kinds of people. When your kitten is sleepy or wants to cuddle in your lap, you have an excellent opportunity to teach her that touching in certain sensitive places is not to be feared. Softly rub her toes, lift her lips and touch her teeth, fold back her ears, and run her tail through your closed hand. In other words, alleviate her fear of being touched by people. Your veterinarian will love you!

Teach your kitten to go into a carrier by placing food tidbits inside and letting her go in and out freely. Give her praise for doing this by saying, "Good Kitty!" This will make it easier for you and less traumatic for her when you do have to take her to the veterinarian or go on a trip. With your kitty in the carrier, take short trips at first – from one room to another, then to the car and back, and then a drive around the block. Eventually, your kitten will get accustomed to traveling in her carrier.

Before weaning, a kitten who plays too roughly with her mother will be warned immediately by a growl. Similarly, if your kitten plays too roughly with you, scream loudly, "OUCH!" until she stops, then praise her for ceasing her rough play. It is important always to follow a reprimand, "Ouch" or "No" with "Good Kitty" when the behavior stops. Never punish your kitten by hitting, chasing, or throwing something at her. For a cat, these acts constitute abuse, and surely this form of punishment causes a cat to become aggressive. If your kitten is getting too rough in a play session, after saying "Ouch" or "No Biting" or whatever verbal signal you want to use, discontinue the play. A kitten wants to play so badly that after the play is ended a few times because of rough play, she will soon learn to play your way.

Keep lots of toys available for energy releasers and use a string or a squeak toy to divert the biting, scratching kitten's attention.

Excessive Licking

Cats lick to keep themselves clean, to rid themselves of varmint like fleas, to cool themselves, to absorb Vitamin D, and to release stress. If a cat's licking is the symptom of a health problem or if the licking is causing a health problem, then kitty must be taken to a veterinarian soon!

There are several medical reasons for excessive licking. It could be a neuropathy problem. For example, a nerve is receiving a signal which tells the cat to lick. It could be encephalitis, a brain perception disorder, a soft tissue or bone inflammation problem, or an allergic skin disease. A cat that licks odd things such as window panes, walls, or cement walks may be anemic which is a symptom of a disease such as feline leukemia. If you suspect a medical problem, see your veterinarian immediately.

Cats lick themselves when they are infested with parasites such as fleas. An occasional bath with a flea shampoo will kill the fleas, as well as remove dander (dried saliva) that causes human allergies. Regular grooming, however, with a flea comb is enough to control the flea problem.

An allergic reaction to inhaled allergens can also cause excessive licking.

It is estimated that thirty-five percent of all cats suffer from food allergies which can result in excessive licking. If diet is suspect, try one of the commercially prepared non-allergy cat foods. It is also thought, though not carefully researched, that a nutritional deficiency might cause excessive licking. Senility will sometimes cause a cat to lick. In this case, you may have to live with the licking. For the older cat, frequent grooming with a comb or brush will reduce the hazard of hairball formation.

A bored cat, a cat weaned too early, and a cat under stress will lick excessively. Get another cat for the bored one or give her more playtime. Disrupt the early-weaned lick with playtime and learn to live with her possible continual licking of a certain soft piece of material. For the cat under stress, keep in mind that she likes a quiet, undisturbed environment and needs lots of love and attention.

Eliminate any form of physical punishment for misbehavior as this creates tremendous stress.

Finally, some cats lick us because they are saying, "I like you!" or "You are the boss." They also go into what seems like an urgent licking mode to cover up their embarrassment after accidentally falling off the chair. These are normal and funny licks and should be readily accepted.

Fleas

Fleas are probably the most successful creatures on the planet in terms of reproduction. There are over 2,400 species. They are difficult to control for a variety of reasons. One female flea will produce 25,000 offspring in one month.

An unfed adult can live for several months. The chemicals used to eradicate adult fleas have no effect on the eggs. Fleas are very good at mutating to resist new pesticides.

Fleas are a menace to cats! They cause allergic dermatitis, tapeworms, and anemia. Most of the eggs are not laid on the cat but in the cat's bedding, in the rug, and on the furniture. It is extremely difficult to eradicate them completely.

The most you can hope for is to control them and to keep your cat reasonably comfortable during the warm, moist flea season.

The best way to control fleas is to remove them from your cat and your house. Take her to a groomer for the day and have her bathed with a veterinarian approved flea shampoo. Spraying or dipping her with a residual pesticide has little or no lasting effect and it can be detrimental to her health. While she is out of the house, hire a company that uses a non-toxic product to spray the carpets and the furniture. These companies usually guarantee a flea-free home for one year.

From this point on, it is important for you to vacuum the carpets, the furniture, and the cat's bedding every day. Place the cut-off end of a flea collar or a moth crystal into your vacuum cleaner bag to kill any vacuumed adult fleas. Vacuum the cat if she will let you!

Groom her daily with a flea comb. Do not be surprised if you occasionally find a flea on her. She will bring them in from the outside if she is an indoor-outdoor cat. Remember, you cannot get rid of them, only control them. Some cats are bothered more by the pesticides than they are by the fleas. Flea collars, sprays, powders, and shampoos are all loaded with pesticides. Beware of insecticide poisoning!

There are a lot of products on the market that claim to get rid of fleas. Flea collars, cedar shaving pet beds, garlic and yeast tablets, water/light traps, and ultra-sonic devices are among them. Research, however, has not shown them to be effective in ridding your cat and house of fleas.

Introducing a Cat or Kitten to Another Cat

Caring for two cats is just as easy as caring for one. They will entertain and exercise each other, and, most importantly, provide company for each other.

If you are already the guardian of a cat and want to adopt another, it is best to adopt one that is younger, smaller, and the opposite sex of the one you now have. Your older, larger cat will be more accepting of a younger, smaller cat. To avoid inter/male, inter/female rivalry, it is best to adopt the opposite sex.

To minimize the possibility of territorial spraying, all cats in the household should be neutered.

Before bringing your new cat or kitten home, take her to a veterinarian to get her wormed and vaccinated. Be sure to get her tested for feline leukemia. After the visit to the veterinarian, take her to a friend's house and give her a bath using an approved cat shampoo. Bathing not only removes fleas but also neutralizes all the other cat's odors which, when detected by your existing cat, will cause her to go crazy. Now your new cat or kitten is ready to go home.

There are two other ways of masking the odor of this new beast who is threatening the security of your existing cat's territory. You can either spray an inexpensive diluted perfume on both cats before the introduction so that they will smell alike, or you can rub a clean, damp towel on your existing cat. Then, using that towel, rub her odor on the new cat, and reverse the procedure with the new cat. They will be more accepting of each other if they smell the same or like themselves!

Next, confine the new kitty, for one day, to one room with her food, water, and litterbox. A litterbox is necessary because this new kitty should not go outside for at least three weeks, even if she is going to be an occasional outside cat. She needs a chance to become accustomed to her new home. If she is to be an indoor cat, then it is best to provide one litterbox per cat, anyway. During this one day confinement, the existing kitty will have a chance to smell and hear the new kitty. The following day, confine the existing kitty in the same room, and let the new kitty roam the house. The third day, let the two cats come together. There will be some chasing, perhaps some hissing, and maybe even some minor fighting. Don't worry. Let them work it out! This behavior may last for three weeks or more. There may also be some spraying by the existing cat. Don't scold her. Just accept this adjustment period. Most cats learn to live together. It is very rare that two cats will not eventually get along. Once the cats have had a chance to get acquainted with each other, you can move their feeding stations closer together, but keep the litterboxes separated in an out-of-the-way quiet place.

From this point on, enjoy their antics and their companionship!

Introducing a New Baby to a Cat

Your cat may feel quite upset at the arrival of a new baby. It is important to follow certain steps to reduce this stress and, if you do, baby and kitty will be friends and companions for a long time.

Make sure your cat is healthy and has been de-wormed. Before bringing baby home, let your cat explore the room where the baby will sleep. Put out some diapers, baby blankets and powder for your cat to smell. Let your cat jump into and out of the crib. If there are rattles or mobiles for her to get used to, let her touch and hear the sounds these make. Record a baby crying and play it on low volume, gradually increasing the volume each day over a period of a few weeks, so your cat can get used to this "noise." Give your cat lots of love and treats during these sound conditioning sessions. If possible, bring a friend's baby into your house each day. This will give your cat a chance to smell and hear a real baby.

After bringing the baby home, try not to alter your cat's routine. Cats are creatures of comfort, security, and the status quo. If you change your cat's routine she may associate this with the arrival of the baby and you may have problems.

Talk to your cat while handling the baby. Give her lots of attention and even a nice food treat at the same time you are giving attention to the baby. Tell your cat that this is her new baby, too. Let your cat smell and touch the baby. There are fewer germs in a cat's mouth than in a human's! Let your cat kiss the baby if she wants. The story about a cat sucking the breath out of a baby while it is sleeping is a myth. It is okay for your cat to get into the crib with the baby, under your supervision, but not a good idea to let her sleep with the baby. Be sure you are relaxed and act happy when the kitty is near the baby. If you act anxious or fearful, your cat will assume the task of protecting you against this critter that is causing you this concern. It is extremely rare for a well-loved pet cat to suddenly strike out at a baby. She may stand and stare at the baby for a long time because she is curious and interested in this new creature, but most cats soon become bored and walk away.

If your cat is not too well adjusted in the first place, or under stress because of some medical problem, or is getting physically punished because of some behavior problem, and as a result, becoming slightly aggressive, then you may want to consult your veterinarian to consider the possibility of giving her a tranquilizer as a temporary solution for a short period of adjustment. If you are cool, calm, and collected about this new intruder breaking into your routine, your cat will be, too. Best wishes to the new family!

The Shy and Fearful Cat

Cats are shy by nature. If your rambunctious, extroverted kitten has grown into a shy adult cat, it may be a normal personality development for her.

Cats are like people. They are all different. Like people, it is difficult to tell how they will turn out as adults. There are, however, some important factors influencing whether or not a cat will extend that basic shyness into fear.

Cats are creatures of comfort and of the status quo. They do not respond well to changes in their environment. Their usual reaction to an unwelcome change will be to distance themselves. They may retreat to a hiding place or, if pushed, they may react aggressively. For a cat, hiding is a normal response to a new or frightening situation.

What can be done about a cat that responds that way? It is best to let her come out in her own good time. If a cat is forced to be social, she may become aggressive and start biting and scratching.

Some cats are shy and fearful because of an illness. If this is new behavior, have her checked by a veterinarian.

There are cats that respond to a new person in the household, be it an adult or baby, by running and hiding. Introducing a new dog or new cat to your household might elicit the same response. If yours is an outside cat she may have been startled by a stranger or an animal, or she may have lost a good fight. These experiences may result in a fearfulness that will convert her to a shy-acting inside cat. A sudden loud noise like thunder, a firecracker, or an engine backfire might send your cat under the bed for months.

A phobic shyness indicates that proper socialization did not take place when your cat was an unweaned kitten. Proper socialization occurs when a very young kitten is handled and cuddled by all kinds of people, sniffed and touched by dogs and cats, and exposed to all kinds of noise out there in the world.

Things are not as frightening if they have been experienced in the comfort and security of one who loves you. Perhaps this did not happen for your cat, and now she is shy and fearful. What can be done about this?

Do not force your adult cat or kitten to come out and greet strangers. Give her time. When she does come out, give her a delicious food treat. Coax her out of hiding by leaving a trail of food to her bowl. Move the bowl a little farther out each day. Talk in soothing, cooing tones to her. Once she does come out, let her greet strangers on her own terms. Praise your shy and fearful cat for every inch of progress. Reinforce the praise with a great food treat. In time, she will accept you. She may always run and hide when others are around. That is this cat's personality, and she will be happy in her own way. The challenge is for you to complete your commitment of love and care for her.

Preparing for the Veterinarian

Cats are truly creatures of comfort. They are most secure in their known environment. It is very upsetting to a cat to leave her own territory to visit the veterinary hospital. At the veterinarian's, she will encounter strange people, unusual odors, and a clinical setting. She will hear barking dogs and meowing cats. She will be handled by a stranger, which, for most cats, is unnerving. Your attitude and how you prepare your cat for that first visit is critical.

If your cat's first visit is due to a severe illness or an accident, she will already be under quite a lot of stress, and so will you. It is important that you be happy, calm, and unconcerned. Your feelings will be transmitted to your cat. If you are acting uneasy or upset, your cat will perceive this as a signal for concern.

Accustom your cat to traveling in a carrying case whether you are going to the veterinary hospital or not. If you use the carrying case only for trips to see the veterinarian, your cat will soon learn to hide under the bed when you get out the carrying case.

Choose carefully a veterinarian who is good with cats and will let you just visit the first time so that your cat will feel comfortable in this strange place. After you arrive, take her out of her carrying case, place her on the table, and let the veterinarian handle her. Give her lots of praise, a good food treat, and then take her back home. A good veterinarian will understand your need to make this first visit a pleasurable one wherein everyone is relaxed and happy.

If you do not have a carrying case, tightly wrap your cat in a large bath towel with only her head showing, and have someone drive you to the veterinarian's. Keep the towel firmly wrapped around her until time for the examination. There are veterinarians who will come to your home. Some even practice as mobile veterinarians. A home call will lessen your cat's anxiety and will be appropriate for most problems.

If your cat is reluctant to get in a carrier or to be wrapped in a towel, you might ask your veterinarian for a mild tranquilizer administered before making the trip to the veterinary hospital or clinic.

Most importantly, your sense of tranquility anytime a veterinarian is examining your cat is essential. Your cat will judge the seriousness of the matter by your expression of emotion.

Finicky Eater

Cats are not finicky eaters by nature. We inadvertently create this problem by substituting food for love.

Before you do anything about your finicky eater, see a veterinarian to make sure she is not off her diet because of poor health. Next, if your cat is healthy, check to see if the local mouse population is slowly being reduced. I have often wondered how a cat who eats raw mice can be categorized as a finicky eater!

Lastly, make sure your cat is not being fed by a loving, but unwise, neighbor. If your cat is not getting food elsewhere, then it is best to choose a good quality food as a staple and to introduce tiny tidbits of a variety of food (not enough to ruin her appetite) as lures and rewards for coming when called, or staying off the counter, or for not scratching the furniture. Use training tidbits just before the main meal.

A cat will become finicky for two reasons. She has been given only one kind of food all of her life and suddenly that has been changed, so she goes on a hunger strike. Or she has been given many different kinds of food and continues to want more and more variety, seemingly never satisfied. To force a healthy cat to change her finicky ways, present a high quality food at mealtime and, if not consumed, present it again and again until hunger forces consumption. It is best not to leave the food down all day but to present it at regular mealtimes. Leaving it there all day can create a finicky eater and a fat cat!

If you choose a high quality food, there is really no need for vitamin supplementation. You will pay more for good cat food but you will use less because a small feeding amount has more nutrients and is more thoroughly digested.

It is not a good idea to feed table scraps to your cat. Cats need a high protein diet with appropriate nutrient additives. Table scraps are not an adequate substitute for these necessary nutrients. If your cat is eating your plants, she may be lacking certain minerals in her diet. You can grow wheat grass in a pot for her to munch.

Use a dry pelleted food provided your cat drinks plenty of water. Dry food helps keep her teeth clean. It is not as likely to be gulped, sometimes a cause of flatulence, and there are no smelly cans in the refrigerator. If your cat drinks very little water, then a semi-moist or moist cat food would be appropriate.

If your cat has suddenly quit eating and checks out as healthy, you might try changing her dish. Some plastic bowls cause an allergic reaction and create tiny sores on the cat's lips. During the dry, cold weather, a metal bowl may give a static electric shock. Use a glass bowl if you suspect either of the above.

Wild Behavior

Cats are nocturnes. They usually spend most of their day sleeping. Their most active periods occur during the early evening and early morning hours. As we shall see, this pattern can be altered.

The explosive behavior sometimes exhibited by cats is normal. Cats will suddenly erupt into a fit, madly dashing around, bouncing off of furniture, running up and across the drapes, and breathing heavily with eyes as big as saucers. This adrenaline rush is necessary for maintenance of cat sanity, if not yours. It is a sudden and necessary release of energy, and most of the behavior is perfectly harmless. Some of this behavior is fantasy hunting for phantom prey.

If the behavior results in household destruction, or in your loss of sleep, then something must be done about it. The most important thing is to give your cat lots of exercise, especially during those early evening hours. Take an old fishing pole and tie a catnip mouse to the end of the line. Cast the phantom prey out across the room while you are watching the evening news. Reel it in and entertain and exercise your cat for hours.

Neutering your cats will have a calming effect and will also reduce those noisy outbursts during the mating season.

If your cat insists on running around at nighttime, provide quiet things for play such as hollow golf balls, ping pong balls, catnip mice, and foam balls. If your cat wants to jump on the bed and play with you, discourage this by popping a balloon in her face. Then hang balloons all around your bedroom door as reminders. Just think how festive the entrance to your bedroom will look!

Do not ever verbally reprimand or physically punish your cat for her sporadic fifty yard dash. This will break the bond you have established with your cat and will create stress which will result in more misbehavior. Fortunately, as she gets older, the number of frantic outbursts will be reduced.

Excessive Crying

There are many reasons why cats cry excessively. A healthy cat may cry a lot because of loneliness and boredom. An older cat will cry excessively because of illness or disorientation. A spoiled cat will cry incessantly because she is constantly rewarded, usually with food, every time she cries.

If your cat is crying excessively, the very first thing to do is have her checked by a veterinarian for any possible illness or injury.

The older cat, losing her hearing, sight, or sense of smell, will sometimes become disoriented and cry. She may not be able to find her food dish or her bed. Place her food and water dish close to her bed and place the litterbox in an easily followed path from her bed. Keep her bed close to yours at nighttime so that you can occasionally reassure her.

Your cat will cry if there is a loss of a human loved one or loss of a companion pet, be it another cat or a dog. Be patient and give her time. You may want to consider getting her another playmate.

Some cats will cry excessively if you have been around a great deal and now are frequently absent. It is better to condition your cat gradually to an ever increasing amount of separation time. Also, getting a companion cat will help.

Cats in heat will cry excessively! Neutering your cat will take care of her vocalizations.

Your cat may cry because she is isolated from you at night. Give in and let her sleep with you! If you do not want her on the bed, place her bed alongside yours and consistently put her into it if she jumps on yours. She will learn in time. When she does go to her own bed, be sure to reinforce this good behavior with lots of praise and a terrific food tidbit.

Some cats exhibit more nocturnal behavior than others. If your cat cries at night wanting you to play, try giving her more exercise during the early evening hours so that she will sleep at night. If you get up to play with her, you will inadvertently reinforce the continuation of this behavior. Tough it out, give her lots of early evening exercise, and disregard her nighttime requests!

If your cat is old and cries because she wants to get warm, place her bedding over the top of a heating pad.

Lethargy

It is natural for cats to spend a lot of time sleeping. A cat will sleep an average of eighteen hours a day. It is natural for a cat to be lethargic after completing a meal. The modern domesticated cat is prone to lethargy primarily because the human caregiver overfeeds and under exercises her! Of course, there are other causes of cat lethargy.

There are many diseases which can result in lethargy. Usually, the first symptom to look for is anemia. Check your cat's gums for a bright pink coloring. If the gums are quite pale and if your cat is also suddenly acting lethargically, see your veterinarian. Even if anemia is not apparent and your cat is suddenly lethargic, get her to a veterinarian.

The loss of a loved one, whether human or animal, can sometimes cause a cat to go into a depression. Time and lots of tender, loving care will usually get her back into activity. A change of diet to a high quality, well-balanced food with more calories will sometimes do the trick.

A past frightening experience could cause a cat to curl up and stay in a safe place each day. Patience, time, and sometimes another cat will get this cat going again.

Just plain boredom can be the cause of lethargy. Provide more playthings, more playtime with you, or another cat to get your cat up and moving again. Two cats are usually happier and more active than one!

The greatest cause of lethargy is too much weight. An overweight cat is susceptible to heart disease, circulation problems, and other medical concerns. Research suggests that a cat is twenty percent overweight faces a mortality rate fifty percent greater than normal. For example, a twelve pound cat whose normal weight is ten pounds is at risk. In addition, an overweight cat is susceptible to many more diseases than a healthy cat. A fat cat's food must be restricted! Do not give her treats or table scraps. Select a high quality food and follow the feeding suggestions on the package. (For a time, you may want to consider earplugs!) Be patient; the crying will be extinguished when she is not reinforced with a full food bowl. Combine weight loss with exercise! Sound familiar?

Traveling with a Cat

A cat is not a born traveler. She would much prefer staying at home with a sitter stopping by each day to freshen the water, refill the food dish, and give a few behind-the-ear scratches. It is sometimes necessary, however, for your cat to join in the travel. Therefore, a carrier of some sort is essential.

If you can, while on a trip, take your cat for walks you may have to condition her to walk with a harness and a leash before you leave. No matter how secure she seems to be, it is always wise to have an identification tag attached to her collar just in case she escapes from the carrier or the leash.

A traveling cat should not be fed several hours before leaving. If you are traveling by car, you may want to ask your veterinarian to prescribe a motion sickness medication for your cat. If you are traveling by airplane, and you have a highly excitable cat, you may want to administer a mild tranquilizer before leaving. Your cat will eat less food while traveling, primarily because of her inactivity. She may suffer the discomfort of constipation or diarrhea. Prepare ahead of time and secure medication from your veterinarian. If you are traveling to a place where the water tastes bad or causes diarrhea, and you will only be there for a short time, take enough water from home for your cat.

Pack objects from home that are familiar to your cat, for example, her bed and favorite toys.

If the weather is extremely hot, put a frozen ice pack in her carrier and never leave her unattended in a car. If the weather is very cold, put a hot water bottle in the carrier.

If you are traveling by air, check with the airline about its policy regarding pet transportation. Some airlines allow pets, in carriers, in the passenger compartments under the seat. This is best because you can touch and talk to her during the flight. If a cat must travel in the baggage compartment, make sure the compartment is heated and pressurized. Try to schedule a direct or non-stop flight so that your cat is not traumatized by transfers.

Check with the place of final destination for inoculation requirements, health certificates, and possible quarantines. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) publishes a booklet that contains travel and immunization regulations for travel in every state in the union and in 110 foreign countries. For information, write: ASPCA, Education Department, 441 E. 92nd St, New York, NY, 10028

The Aging Cat

A cat can live for twenty years or more but the average is probably closer to fifteen years. Signs of advancing years are decreased activity, gray hair, hearing loss, decaying teeth, lethargic movements, clouded eyes, bad breath, a craving for warmth, inactivity, and a demand for more attention.

There are some things you can do to make these advancing years more comfortable for your cat. It is especially important not to disrupt your cat's daily routine, for she clings to the security of her routine. If you must leave for a day or two, it is best not to board her. Ask someone to come into your house and take care of her. Provide a warm, snugly place for her to spend time.

An aging cat is very intolerant with an unclean litterbox. Clean it daily for a happy cat. It is important to be patient and not scold your aging cat for occasionally having an accident. Defecation outside the litterbox can be due to arthritis. Urination outside can be caused by a number of diseases. Incontinence can be taken care of with a pet diaper.

It is best to cut back on your aging cat's caloric intake. A diet with less fat will also help. There are maintenance diets for older cats available in several commercial brands. Watch for weight changes. An overweight cat is a sure candidate for an earlier than normal death. An underweight cat needs to be taken to the veterinarian for a check-up. The medical signs to look for in an unhealthy aging cat are: fatigue and weight loss, hyperactivity and weight loss, lameness or listlessness, coughing or heavy breathing, and excessive drinking and frequent urination. It is advisable to take your cat for regular check-ups when she approaches old-age.

Try to get your cat to move around each day. It will stimulate circulation, keep the joints flexible, perk up the appetite and digestion, and help make her alert and aware of her surroundings.

If your cat is in constant pain, is undergoing difficult and stressful medical treatments, is unresponsive to your affection, or is seemingly unaware of her surrounding, it might be time to do the loving thing and end her suffering. There are veterinarians who will come to your home, spend some time counseling you in an effort to ease your concern with the procedure and will even let you hold your friend until the end.

No matter what anyone tells you, intense grief over the loss of a pet is normal and natural. The loss of unconditional and non-judgmental love given to you by your beloved friend and companion can leave you devastated.

To help you through this period of grief, your veterinarian or a pet loss counselor might be helpful. I would highly recommend a book entitled "Coping With Sorrow in the Loss of Your Pet" by Moira Anderson.

Suggested Reading

Pat Widmer's Cat Book by Patricia P. Widmer, (New American Library, 1981). A good basic book on the health, care, and behavior of cats.

No Naughty Cats by Debra Pirotin and Sherry Suib Cohen, (Ballantine Books, 1985). Inexpensive, easily read, and my favorite for helping solve behavior problems.

How To Be Your Cat's Best Friend by Elizabeth Randolph, (Ballantine Books, 1981). Another good book on the basics of caring for, and understanding, a cat.

How To Get Your Cat To Do What You Want by Warren and Fay Eckstein, (Villard Books, Random House, 1990). This book expresses a loving philosophy on how to build a lasting bond with your cat. It also offers excellent advice on how to train your cat.

The Body Language and Emotion of Cats by Myrna M. Milani, (William Morrow Company, 1987). A beautifully written book delving into the essence of what a cat is all about.

Cats, (A series of Behavior Booklets), by Ian Dunbar and Gwen Bohnenkamp, (Center for Applied Animal Behavior, 2000 Center Street, #1406, Berkeley, CA 94704, 1985). These booklets describe a caring way to handle a few of the most common behavior problems.

Coping With Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet by Moira K. Anderson, (Peregrine Press, 1978). This book will help you get beyond the grief of the death of your beloved cat.

About the Author

Rod has been a student of pet behavior all of his life. His professional experience with dog and cat behavior problems started at the Tacoma/Pierce County Humane Society where he established a Pet Behavior Hotline. He writes a weekly pet column for the Tacoma News Tribune in which he answers questions submitted by readers. He also conducts a bi-monthly one hour program on a major radio station in Seattle where he answers listeners' questions about pet behavior problems. In private practices, Rod offers a telephone and in-house counseling service for pet caregivers directed at understanding and solving their pets' problems.

His own current menagerie includes Hank, a mixed-breed Benji look-alike, and Mike and Molly, mixed-breed American Short-haired cats.