

Anxiety in Cats

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

Signs & Symptoms

Initial Symptoms

- Scratching
- Pacing
- Ears back and/or flattened
- Hiding
- Shaking/tremoring
- Dilated pupils

Intermediate Symptoms

- Drooling
- Licking
- Brush tail appearance
- Lack of appetite
- Hunched back
- Hissing/growling

Advanced Symptoms

- Severe isolation from other family members
- Drastic behavior changes such as unprovoked attacks on family members or other pets resulting in significant injury.
- Over grooming
- Inappropriate urination
- Inappropriate defecation
- Severe avoidance
- Anal gland expression

What Is It?

Anxiety, contained within the diagnosis of feline behavior disorders, is one of the most common reasons for a pet to be brought to a shelter, re-homed, or abandoned. Unfortunately, much of the general public lacks behavioral education regarding cat ownership and therefore, despite the severity of a variety of behavioral disorders, many owners feel at a loss to control and help their pet and their family. In general, most cats experience some degree of anxious and fearful behaviors. Cats, by nature, prefer a consistent, predictable environment. Stressful situations may include the arrival of new pets or new human family members, too many cats in the home or environment, moving, re-decorating, new visitors, veterinary visits, traveling, and loud noises. Similar to people, stress, regardless of the source, affects the pet's whole wellbeing - stress takes a toll on the physical health as well as the emotional stability of an animal. Just as stress can result from physical illness, it also can manifest physically as recurrent infections, inappropriate urinary issues, obesity, stress licking and overgrooming.

Diagnosis

As stress can manifest from both emotional and physical stimuli, anxiety secondary to another condition is very common. Primary anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues also exist that may have been passed down genetically or caused in the very early kitten developmental stages, but may respond well to medical management. Diagnosing the disease is generally accomplished with a detailed owner history and the ability of the clinician to observe the pet for classic signs of anxiety such as hiding, slinking behavior, ears back or flattened, hissing, running away, and other behaviors.

Treatment and Management

Regardless of the initial cause(s) of the anxiety, treatment centers around a multimodal approach that incorporates medical care, supplemental, and behavioral therapy. Consultation with a veterinary behaviorist can prove very beneficial to formulate a plan that not only addresses potential medication that may be helpful, but also to discuss basic at home behavioral modification plans. An active treatment plan is important, but requires time, dedication, and willingness on the part of the owner. Some of the central concepts to correct behavior at home include the following:

Desensitization is one of the primary methods used to effectively treat the actual cause of the anxiety in a pet through short controlled non-threatening exposures to the source of the anxiety. For example, desensitization to nail trimmers may begin with the nail trimmers in view of the pet. This creates a small non-threatening situation for the pet to dial down their own anxiety with time and repeated exposures. The level of anxiety-eliciting challenges slowly increase until the cat will let someone clip the nails.

Counter Conditioning is a method wherein the pet receives a reward every time they are exposed to their anxiety-inducing stimulus until they associate a reward with the feared stimulus. For example, if every time an owner gives



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Management Tips

Consider providing:

- Accessible water/food in multiple locations
- Consistent meals to manage weight
- Safe areas away from others to hide
- Thunder shirts and therapeutic clothes
- Pheromone collars and other products
- Natural calming supplements like Composure
- A screened area (Catio), supervised time outside
- A window perch, bird feeder, aquarium
- An elevated cat highway
- Daily playtime and training with owners
- Gentle deterrents such as double sided tape and contact paper

Try to:

- Be consistent with medications
- Treat any medical conditions present and manage chronic diseases
- Never abruptly force your pet into a stressful situation without warning
- Always reward positive behavior
- Increase creative stimulation/exercise
- Have at least one 3 ft tall scratch post
- Put cat condos/beds in high places so cats can get away from other pets and children
- Avoid having too many cats at once
- Stay up to date with basic vet. care
- Track appetite, urination, drinking, weight, vomiting, diarrhea, energy, etc.
- Give everyone in the family a role
- Provide several litter boxes, scoop daily
- Use family, friends, or in home pet sitters and grooming

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their cat a treat when they brush the cat's fur, eventually the value of that treat will outweigh the anxiety and the grooming will be associated with pleasure. Avoiding the stressful stimulus when possible and redirecting the cat's energy toward a more positive outlet is important for long-term success. For example, some owners prepare for a thunderstorm by shutting the blinds, sheltering the pet in a calm area, and trying to avoid the anxiety itself as much as possible.

Medical and Supplemental Therapy

Many cats with generalized anxiety can greatly benefit from the short or long term use of one or more medical options to reduce and manage anxiety before it progresses to depression and aggression. A multimodal approach of medications in combination with other therapies such as behavioral modification is ideal. Medications, such as Prozac, can take weeks to begin working and need dose management over time. Several supplements such as herbal, pet-safe essential oils, pheromone containing items, and others can help some pets, and owners should proceed with a trial and error approach. Acupuncture, reiki, massage, supervised socialization, increased stimulation, and exercise are other possible therapies to explore. Sometimes, restructuring the social dynamic of a multi-cat household may be necessary if not all the cats can get along. Making sure there are safe, high areas, mental stimulation, a healthy hierarchy in multi-cat households, and other household arrangements may be helpful.

Prognosis

The prognosis for generalized anxiety is unpredictable, based on many facets of the cat, owner, and household. Anxiety is considered a chronically incurable but manageable disease. Proper medication with behavioral modification and supplements generally results in a favorable prognosis for most pets. Remember that anxiety is NOT the same as aggression, but high anxiety situations can lead to eventual aggressive behavior such as severe bites and scratches. Talk with your veterinarian, consult with a veterinary behaviorist, and tailor the treatment to your specific cat's needs.

Never:

- Insert yourself between two or more cats who are fighting as this could result in severe injury
- Try and challenge a cat showing clear aggression and signs of warning behavior
- Physically harm your pet in response to a negative behavior, throw, kick or hit them

Always:

- Make sure your pet is up to date on their rabies vaccination, registered, identifiable, microchipped and controllable
- Warn others of your pet's behavior before allowing them to touch/ approach your pet.