



Module 23: Cat Anxiety, Fear and Aggression

- What separation anxiety is
- Why cats fear thunderstorms
- About outdoor phobias
- About eating disorders

Addressing cat behaviours is about understanding the following:

- What separation anxiety is
- Why cats fear thunderstorms
- About outdoor phobias
- About eating disorders
- Aggression

Cat Anxiety, Fear and Aggression - 5m02s

23.1 Introduction

Your cat may be displaying fear, anxiety or aggression.

These are often psychological responses to stimuli that create a sense of fear or a threat.

To help your cat become well-adjusted and address behaviours that result due to fear, anxiety or aggression, you need to understand exactly why they occur. You can also prevent certain anxieties and fears based on your treatment of your cat.

23.2 Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is a common behavioural issue found in cats.

It occurs most often in a home where the cat is the only pet or when the owner is frequently at home. It can also occur from kitten-hood based on how you treated your kitten versus your change in behaviour. Cats are very tuned into human behaviour.

Most of us enjoy kittens because they are so cute when little. Their behaviours make them adorable - before it becomes damaging or not so cute anymore.

We tend to be more lenient with kittens and this is where some bad behaviour can be learned.

This is also a time where you may want to cuddle your cat more. You want to make sure it is reassured about being in a new home; you might let it into your bed or fuss over it every time you walk in the door. Your kitten is learning with all these behaviours.

When you stop picking up your cat as often, ignore it when you get home, or you leave for longer periods of time without returning to cuddle, your cat can develop separation anxiety.

Let's say you worked from home when you first brought the cat into your house. Your cat got used to you being there for most of the time. Suddenly you have a job out of the house and you are home less often. Your cat will feel separation anxiety because you are suddenly not around as much.

Your cat can feel separation anxiety if an owner dies and never returns. The main person that is always around may leave or change their routine, and this can also cause separation anxiety. Your cat literally fears that the person they are around most often is not going to come back.

You can help with this fear. You can alleviate it by giving your cat affection, play time and time alone. The best option is to be home but have your cat in another room. Your cat will get used to you not being around.

If you do not observe their separation anxiety is becoming desensitised, you have more options. You can start to go out of the house more often. Desensitisation is to make your cat used to you being gone. The first step is to make certain your cat understands you have to go out and there is nothing to worry about. Separation anxiety can show up in a variety of ways, from damage to your home, carpet and possessions. For other cats it is about being overly affectionate when you return. You can help your cat get used to your absence by leaving the house for 10 minutes and then returning.

Another way to help your cat is to assist them through their loneliness. They are lonely because you are gone. Giving your cat a companion to be with when you are gone can help. It will take time to introduce a new cat, dog or other pet, but once the proper companionship forms you will usually see a change in their behaviour. They will still greet you at the door and want affection; however, they

may not cling to you every minute you are home. Most often, when a cat has company, such as another cat, they will start to cuddle, play and sleep next to this other cat. Even if they do not get along as the best of friends there can still be a relationship that helps your cat with the separation anxiety to become more relaxed.

If these natural methods do not work you may need to get medication from your vet to help calm your cat's anxieties.

23.3 Thunderstorm Fears



Cats are not usually as sensitive as dogs to thunderstorms.

Most will sense the storm, know it is about to thunder, but go back to sleep. However, there are always exceptions to the rule and there are some cats that can be just as fearful of thunderstorms as dogs. It often happens when there is something else to associate the fear with. For example, thunder may have occurred the first time in the cat's life when it did not have a companion, was abused or was outside.

The key is to help your cat when there is a thunderstorm.

Some cats will simply run and hide; trying to burrow away from the noise and be safe. Other cats will not know what to do. They might run and try to hide, but continue to come out and seek your gaze. If they are seeking you in any way then you can help calm them down. Show your cat there is nothing to fear.

Sit with your cat. Pet your cat. If your cat runs, let him/her run away and be there when they come back. Coax your cat into your lap if you can. Let your cat know you are there and ready to help them. Pet your cat, make the experience as normal as possible, and show your cat there is nothing to fear.

As with any issue you may need to help your cat more. You may need your vet to supply a low-level anxiety medicine. There are medicines to provide your cat with that can be used when you know a thunderstorm is coming. It is far better to determine if there is another reason for the fear. It could be a fear of loud noises. Your cat may run away from any loud noise, such as a train, a lorry, a large bang if you drop something, or any other loud noise. Desensitisation to loud noises is far easier than handling thunderstorms. However, if you can get your cat used to certain loud noises it may help them with their anxiety over thunderstorms.

23.4 Outdoor Phobias

Outdoors is where cats used to live and often still do live.

Many cats enjoy the outdoors, but there are certain cats that are fully domesticated that actually fear going outside. You should not push your cat into the outdoors, but allow your cat to explore outside under controlled conditions.

If your cat does not like the outdoors, retreats from the door or tries to run back inside the minute you set the cat outside, then you need to work slowly to help your cat see that the outdoors is not to be as feared as they believe.

You do not want to desensitise your cat completely. There should only be one door you allow your cat to use at their leisure. Once your cat gets used to this and is no longer afraid you should pick up your cat and set it outside.

Leaving the door open is the best way to get some cats used to the outdoors. You should also train your cat early to accept a lead and harness. Training your cat early to accept a lead and harness ensures your cat will not run when scared. If your cat does run, this also means you can safely control the animal and get your cat back into the house.

Usually it just takes some time for your cat to get used to unknown territories.

Some cats never like the outdoors. They might have had a bad experience or simply fear the open space. Other cats do not like being on a harness and lead, but love going out to explore on their own. Cats are usually pretty savvy when it comes to staying away from cars, and tend to enjoy nocturnal roams versus daytime explorations.

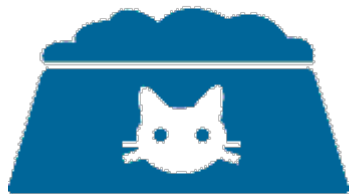
FACT



When cats grimace they are usually “taste-scenting.” They have an extra organ that, with some breathing control, allows the cats to taste-sense the air.

Source: buzzfeed.com

23.5 Eating Disorders



Eating is something your cat enjoys.

However, there can be anxiety based eating disorders that occur. These disorders usually happen when there is a change in your routine with your cat. The first thing you should do is eliminate any medical issue that might be causing a change to your cat's normal eating habit. You will notice the change because your cat may always be at the food bowl or alternatively may be losing weight. Eating problems may be related to their teeth. Cats can have cavities which require a tooth to be pulled. After the offending tooth is gone their eating can return to normal.

Bartonella is a flea borne disease that can affect their gums with gingivitis. This pain may deter your cat from eating. Internal struggles such as kidney stones or failure, liver failure, or other medical issues can also cause pain, and thus an eating disorder. Unfortunately it is hard to diagnose these issues unless you visit a vet.

Aggression can also follow with these medical issues.

Your cat may not wish to be touched in certain locations because of pain, so they bite or scratch. This is a good indication that the eating issue is medically related.

When you have ruled out medical problems you then have to look at eating disorders as more than being bored with food. You cannot compensate by always switching your cat's food. They might eat it for a few days, but they will revert to eating very little or not eating at all, due to an anxiety issue that is affecting them.

Eating disorders can result from any fear or anxiety your cat is feeling. While it generally happens due to separation anxiety there might be fear of another pet, person or sound, that is causing the issue.

23.6 Aggression



Aggression happens for several reasons.

Aggression can be a result of fear or anxiety, such as separation anxiety. It may also be due to pain.

As suggested above, you will need to rule out the most obvious reasons for aggression.

Pain is certainly easier to see because their pain can be felt. If you touch them in a sensitive spot they may bite as a result of the pain. Aggression may be shown from a cat that does not like certain areas to be petted.

Some cats are very aggressive if you try to touch their stomach, their ears, tail, or around their eyes. They might be aggressive only in play, yet allow some areas to be touched when they are lying around and relaxed.

However, when aggression is caused by something more unnatural than instincts to protect, it can be a result of a phobia. Separation anxiety can turn into aggression, where your cat is even aggressive with you. Your cat may start to bite, hiss, growl, or seem feral because of their abandonment issues. You will need to let your cat come to you and to trust you again if this behaviour results. Let your cat see you are there to play, to pet them, and to feed them.

Aggression can also show up in older cats that have not been spayed/neutered. As part of their sexual maturity, male cats especially can turn aggressive. You can help reduce this behaviour by getting your cat spayed/neutered. If this does not change the aggression you should look for other reasons, such as a bid for affection, abuse from something in their life, past events, or medical issues.

Overall, when you train and care for your cat, remember that your behaviour is watched and learned by the cat. You need to make certain your cat is comfortable, loved and well cared for.

23.7 Help Your Cat Gain Confidence

Cats are often easily startled and skittish and may develop serious phobias.

You can help your cat develop confidence and desensitise him to fear triggers over time:

1. Give your cat time to get over her fears. Don't force her to come out of hiding
2. Reward good behaviour with toys and treats
3. Introduce new pets slowly and give them time to get used to the new addition
4. Create consistent routines for your cat. Cats like predictability and following a routine helps reduce anxiety and uncertainty

Create a Calming Environment for your Pet

Create a safe, enjoyable environment for your pet. Provide high perches, places to hide, food treats and toys in the space.

At the same time, don't walk on eggshells. If your cat is scared of the vacuum cleaner, keep using it but get her used to the sound slowly. Don't avoid using a vacuum cleaner around her. After all, you want to make her confident.

If there's a family member or person in the house that the cat is particularly scared of, get them to feed the cat. She will learn to slowly trust him or her over time. Don't force the pace but don't keep feeding her fears either.

Expose your pet to new experiences without forcing her into uncomfortable situations.

Summary

Cat fear, anxiety and aggression are sometimes brought on due to medical issues or learned behaviours. However, when these behaviours become detrimental to your cat or you feel there is harm to you, then you need to make certain you address these issues.

Vets can help you rule out certain issues and help you treat their fears, phobias and aggression in the right way.

Desensitisation or medicine may be necessary to help your cat relax, return to normal and be the loving cat you have always had. Sometimes behaviours develop later in cats, and some are brought about from kitten-hood.

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