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Anxious Kitty? A Routine Can Help

BY RITA REIMERS AND LINDA HALL

Cats are all about survival, individually and for the species. When cats are in fear of losing their resources, or if a predator is nearby, they become stressed, fearful, maybe even a little (or a lot!) aggressive. Some cats hide, some cats attack, but their behaviors are really two sides of the same coin: They are both reactions to anxiety.

What's the cause?

Before we even begin a behavior session, we simply listen. We ask our clients about each cat (and other pets) in their household, what their usual demeanor is and what the issues are in detail. We usually see the

same pattern: One cat is labeled “the bully,” and the other is “the victim.” Usually if there is a third cat, that cat is “Switzerland” and doesn’t get involved in the disagreements.

We understand the labels. When one cat is chasing and growling, and

another is fleeing in fear, that’s what it looks like. Fighting, spraying, inappropriate urination/defecation, misdirected aggression — all of these unwelcome behaviors come from the same place: anxiety and fear.

Let’s step back and look at how cats →



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behave in nature. Every single thing cats do is done out of preservation of themselves and their species. Remember, cats are both predator *and* prey in the food chain. There is always the possibility that another animal could come along and steal their territory, their food or even hurt or kill them.

We'd be nervous wrecks, too, if we had to live like that. In fact, the most anxious kitties we see are often ones who have lived outside in that world, fighting for resources, meals and even their lives. It's a tough way to live. But, the instinct to either fight for resources or hide away from predators is alive in all cats, whether they have lived outside or not.

Ease that anxiety

To help your anxious kitty, **the first step is to understand the root cause of his behavior.** For example, if your cat pees on your bed or sofa, it's easy to become angry. No one wants to live like that! However, if understanding that your cat was so stressed that he needed to mix his scent with yours, it's much easier to be kind. We're still not thrilled about the pee mistake, but knowing that it wasn't done to purposely annoy us, we can handle it better. Cats do not exact revenge and do not express inappropriate behaviors to spite you. Yelling or punishing a stressed cat will only make the situation worse! If someone yelled at you

when you were stressed, how would you react?

Second step: Put some daily routines in place. Those outside cats have a strict schedule they follow every day. Routine, any routine, lets our cats know what to expect, and this makes them feel more secure. It also fits more into their natural activity of hunting for their

Always have your kitty
checked by a veterinarian
to **rule out medical issues** before assuming it's a behavioral problem.

The Four Pegs Routine



A routine we often recommend is our “Four PEGS” of cat behavior. Cats in nature hunt their Prey (indoors we Play hunt), which then they Eat, of course. Next they will Groom themselves to get rid of the scent of their meal so as not to attract predators or other cats looking for leftovers. Then, they go to Sleep to burn up that protein. Watch how your indoor cat behaves after his meal, and you'll see these same behaviors happen over and over again.

Inside our homes, exchange Prey for Play at least twice a day, before breakfast and before dinner. Just five to 15 minutes is all you need. In the mornings, give your cat breakfast just before you go to work. This helps cats with separation anxiety: They will be busy eating while you quietly slip out the door. Then at night, play again, then put down his dinner so he eats while you get ready for bed. Doing PEGS at night signals to your cat that the day is over, and most cats will let us sleep undisturbed until morning when we do it again. No more 4 a.m. food calls!

food. There are many times and activities you can create routines around for your kitty. You may already be doing some right now.

Third step: Keep calm and carry on. Cats are empathic. They study us constantly and know our every facial expression and vocal tone. They know when we are upset, and sometimes that's enough to cause our cats stress. If you are scared or upset, your cat will take his cues from you. We know it might be difficult to remain calm in all situations, but fake it 'til you feel it!

Fourth step: Use low tones and keep a calm atmosphere to help cats prone to being high-strung and anxious in any situation. If your loud friends or family are coming to visit, set up a nice place in a bedroom or other safe space, where your cat can hang out and feel secure.

Anxious cats need us to help them relax, so they can enjoy spending time with you, without any fear. 🐾



Rita Reimers and Linda Hall are co-founders of The Cat Behavior Alliance, offering a unique duo-approach to cat behavior correction. Visit them at catbehavioralliance.com for more information. You can also find them on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok @CatBehaviorAlliance.

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