

Minimizing Stress In Cats in a Modern World



Domestic cats are not the ideal species to try to fit into the average household, despite their having been domesticated for thousands of years. For most of that time, cats were mainly outdoors or indoor-outdoor. In today's world it's not safe for cats outside, so many live strictly indoors. Many behavioral and health problems in cats are related to the fact that we expect them to live in an environment they are not quite suited for. The better job you do adjusting your household to the emotional and behavioral style of the feline, the happier and less stressed your cat will be.

Cats living the wild life outdoors socialize and live in groups of related individuals they know well. Brothers, sisters, moms, aunts, uncles and cousins hang out together. Strangers - unrelated cats - are incorporated into a group of cats very slowly, if at all. It usually takes a year or more for a newcomer to gradually work her way into a social group. She (or he, but unneutered males are more likely to be loners) spends month after month hanging around on the outskirts of a group until finally being accepted. Yet in our homes, we expect a new cat to be best buds with the resident cat within a few weeks - it's not a very realistic thing to ask of a cat! (In fact, it's much the same with people. You wouldn't expect a newly adopted child or the new kid in the classroom to be adjusted and settled in after only a few weeks.)

Aggression or tension among housemates may result in outright physical confrontation and injury, but more commonly feline tension can result in subtle signs of unease and chronic low-grade stress. Urine spraying, litter box avoidance, overgrooming, avoidance of areas in the home that were formerly a cat's sleeping places and other signs may result. When introducing a new cat, it's best if each cat has his or her own territory, sleeping places, litter box, and food and water bowls. It usually works well to keep the new cat in a separate bedroom for several weeks before slowly introducing him to the rest of the house. Give the resident cat his very favorite snack treat whenever the new cat is close by, at least for a few weeks. (Try sardines, tuna or bits of chicken.) That way, she'll come to associate the newcomer with good things. Kittens are usually more easily introduced than older cats.

Chronic stress in pets has health consequences just as it does in people. People tend to get an upset stomach when they are worried. In cats, the bladder often is the organ that becomes inflamed and uncomfortable. Feline bladder disease may flare up with a move, introduction of a new pet or family member, or a stressful time in the home, such as a divorce. Any litter box problems are bound to get a lot worse if the cat associates the litter pan with pain from an inflamed bladder. Cats are very situational - if they were in pain in the litter box they associate the box with the pain and will often avoid going in it again. They don't understand that the box didn't cause the pain, they don't think that way.

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