

Overcoming Stress: The Path to Feline Zen

Discover the secrets to a tranquil life for your feline friends. From the calming effects of specific scents to the joy of play, find out how simple, natural strategies can dramatically reduce stress levels in cats, fostering happier, healthier pets.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A groundbreaking study concluded that healthy cats can behave as if they're sick when their routine is altered, and they feel stressed as a result; there's a scientific explanation behind the often-used phrase "stress kills"
- Many of the things you find stressful also feel stressful to your kitty; in addition, there are things you might not be aware of that can also contribute to your cat feeling out of control and highly stressed
- Unlike a human, your cat can't de-stress with a hot yoga class or meditation; stress management for your cat involves providing her with a feline-friendly living situation
- You can use your cat's five senses to create an environment and lifestyle for her that helps relieve stress and encourages vibrant health and a long life

Feline family members are at special risk for illness and emotional and behavioral difficulties as a result of living a stressful existence. Years ago, researchers at The Ohio State University's (OSU) College of Veterinary Medicine made a groundbreaking discovery with regard to the effect on indoor cats when their normal routine is disrupted.

In a study of 12 healthy cats and 20 cats with **interstitial cystitis** (IC), it was determined healthy cats can behave as if they're sick when their routine is altered.¹ Sickness behaviors like refusal to eat, vomiting, and **litterbox avoidance** tripled in healthy cats whose routines were disturbed.

However, the study results also showed that cats with IC experience significant symptom reduction in an enriched environment. Symptoms improved by 75% to 80% when cats were fed at the same time each day, their litterboxes stayed in the same spot, and regular playtime was encouraged.

Understanding the Stress Response

Stressful situations provoke a fight-or-flight response in all animals, including felines. When ongoing, chronic stress is present, the fight-or-flight switch stays in the "on" position, which has the potential to throw all body systems out of balance.

If you started your car, left it in park, depressed the gas pedal and revved the motor nonstop for an extended period of time, eventually, you would cause significant wear and tear to the engine. Just as cars are designed to move when the gas pedal is depressed, bodies are designed to move when the fight-or-flight switch is activated.

During a stressful event, glucose is released from sites throughout the body, and blood carrying glucose and oxygen is diverted toward organs used during physical exertion like the heart, skeletal muscles, and brain. If this cycle occurs so often there is a constant release of glucose and chronic overworking of fight-or-flight organs, it's easy to predict the result.

Systemic inflammation is a result of chronic stress. A body that remains in a constant state of arousal, ready to fight or take flight at all times, will experience declining function and/or disease in some or most important systems including digestive and urinary, immunologic, musculoskeletal, and cardiovascular.

Studies in humans have linked chronic stress to susceptibility to infection and cancer, as well as various metabolic syndromes, including diabetes. The physiologic changes that occur in older animals, including cats, are also seen as a result of chronic stress.

The same power the body possesses to fight or flee under stress, when given no outlet, will wear the body down and ultimately cause death. Thus, the expression "stress kills."

What Causes Stress in Cats?

If you're a cat guardian, you know that our feline friends are supremely independent creatures. It's their nature to set their own schedules, exert maximum control over their environment, and depend on no other creature for survival.

When we **bring felines indoors** to fill the role of companion animals, they don't lose the natural instinct to rule their environment. The more you can do to help your cat feel in control and not trapped in unknown or unfriendly territory, the less stress he'll feel and the better his health and quality of life will be.

When you disrupt your pet's routine, it translates to him as a loss of control over his very survival. As humans, a sense that we've lost control over some aspect of our lives often creates feelings of tremendous stress. The same is often true for your beloved kitty. Examples of stressful events for your cat might include:

- Noisy environments/loud parties
- A new family member; sudden absence of a family member
- Aggression among household members, including pets
- Moving to a new home
- Poor quality diet
- A change in your daily schedule
- Competing with other pets at mealtime
- Neighbor cats close enough that your kitty sees, hears, or smells them
- Social isolation
- **Getting older**

Since your cat can experience one or several of these stressors on a daily basis, it's important to have some tools at your disposal to help kitty cope and relax.

Feline Stress Reduction Techniques

The goal of stress reduction is to return balance to the nervous system so the body can regain its equilibrium and perform restorative processes crucial to preventing the decline of major organs and systems.

The opposite of being stressed is being relaxed, which is why stress management techniques involve activities that promote relaxation. For humans, this usually involves an activity such as meditating, taking a yoga class, doing deep breathing exercises, using guided imagery, engaging in physical exercise, etc.

For your cat it's a bit different. She needs an environment ideally adapted for a feline in order to enjoy a comfortable, serene lifestyle. What you want to do for your kitty is to think about how she experiences her living situation through the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

- **Reducing visual stress** — Your kitty appreciates variety in the lighting in his environment. Sometimes he wants to sit in the sunshine. Other times he prefers a dark spot to nap or hide out in.

Build variety into the lighting your cat is exposed to with items like boxes, play tunnels, perches in different spots, closet shelving — even an empty cabinet he can safely access.

Boredom causes stress, so you might also want to consider kitty videos or a window perch where your cat can relax and keep an eye on neighborhood happenings or the bird feeder in your backyard.

- **Reducing auditory stress** — According to Dr. Narda Robinson, writing for Veterinary Practice News, a study² published in 2011 concludes:

"Expanding experimental evidence indicates that music modulates both cardiac and neurologic function, squelching stress through both biochemical and neuromodulatory means."³

Slow classical music seems to relax most animals. By contrast, loud music, the noise of much of today's TV programming, and arguments among humans in the home elevate stress levels and promote a systemic inflammatory response.

- **Reducing olfactory stress** — Smells that can cause stress for kitties include cigarette smoke, chemical cleaning products, cologne, air fresheners and scented candles.

Cats are known to respond well to certain aromas, including fresh air, catnip, lavender, chamomile flowers, valerian root and pheromones. Experiment with a variety of these scents and see which ones your cat seems to like. If you discover she has a particular favorite, consider safely adding the scent to an area of your home your kitty hangs out in.

Catnip can be purchased in a variety of forms — there are catnip toys, mists, flakes, and pellets you can sprinkle around your home, and other catnip kitty accessories.

- **Reducing diet-related stress** — Feeding **a diet specifically designed for your carnivorous cat** is the best way to prevent nutritionally-related stress. Species-appropriate nutrition for your cat will include a diet rich in animal protein and moisture. Older kitties often need even higher levels of protein than youngsters to prevent a decline in lean body mass as they age.

Keeping up with **your cat's dental health** is also very important in preventing diet-related stress, as is hairball control. I also recommend consulting your holistic vet about beneficial dietary supplements, like **digestive**

enzymes.

Ensuring your cat gets some exercise will help with gastrointestinal (GI) motility, as will regular massages.

- **Reducing somatic stress** — Speaking of kitty massage, it's also a good way to reduce all kinds of stress-related symptoms like anxiety, pain and depression.

Petting, cuddling, and brushing your cat, as long as he's willing, will not only reduce her stress level but will strengthen the bond you share with her. If she doesn't like to be touched at all, especially if this is a recent development, I recommend you have her examined by your vet to rule out any painful condition that could be causing her refusal to be stroked or held.

Acupuncture and chiropractic can also relieve stress and support healthy immune function.

Cats living in stressful situations are at risk of developing chronic illnesses and behavior problems that can make living with them a challenge. That's why for the love of your favorite feline, it's important to set her up for success in an environment that is enriched and as stress-free as possible.

Sources and References

¹ [Stella, J.L. et al. Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, Volume 238: Issue 1, January 1, 2011](#)

² [Cervellin, G. and Lippi, G. Eur J Intern Med, 2011 Aug;22\(4\):371-4](#)

³ [Veterinary Practice News October 27, 2011](#)
