

Happy Cats

How can I have a happy, stress-free cat?

For a cat to be happy, a guardian must satisfy his basic needs: Food, water, clean litter box, warm places to sleep and companionship. But most important, all of these must be free from stress.

The dictionary defines stress as “a specific response by the body to a stimulus, such as fear or pain, which disturbs or interferes with the normal physiological equilibrium of an organism.” When a cat is confronted by what he perceives as a “stressor” or a potential threat, his body goes into a “fight or flight” reaction. Adrenaline floods the body, readying it for action. If the stressor continues, the cat will either act out toward his environment, for example, toward you, a family member, another pet or the carpet or toward himself, such as licking excessively or becoming ill or depressed.



Distressing Behavior. Urinating outside the box, spraying, biting or scratching are the kinds of “acting out” behaviors that bring cat guardians to behavior consultations. Of course, if a cat is ill or injured, no amount of behavior modification will be effective. So the first step before any behavior modification program can take place is to receive a clean bill of health from a veterinarian. Once physical troubles are taken out of the picture, you can look for triggers in the environment.

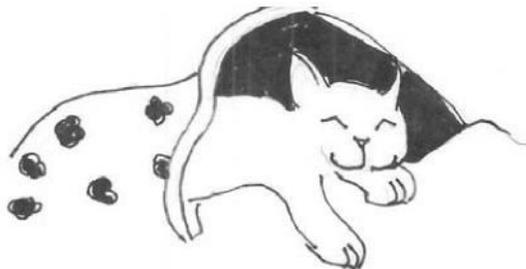
Cats are creatures of habit so any changes in routine can be upsetting to them. A new baby or pet, strange people, home improvement projects, an unknown noise or animal outside, can all stress out a cat. So, like people, who may comfort themselves with food or exercise to relieve stress, a cat will self-comfort. For instance, in the case of a perceived challenger outside, a cat may reclaim his territory by marking or urinating outside the box inside the home.

It's best to address such environmental stressors with a behavior consultant. Then you can turn to other ways to help make your cat feel loved and safe, such as triple-checking that all of his needs are being met. He will love you for it.

Food. Your cat needs a high-quality feline kibble and/or wet food; these are generally not sold at grocery stores. There are many brands that meet this requirement, but there is also a dizzying array of foods: Grain-free, high-protein, senior diet, hairball elimination assistance, indoor only. Cats are true carnivores; they don't eat grain or carbohydrates in the wild. The first few ingredients of their food should be meat. Wet food is about 70 % water, as is the natural food of cats, mice and gophers, so it is more species appropriate for them. Wet food is particularly important, for male cats, who may be prone to urinary tract blockages.

Water. Plentiful, fresh water is important to cats and many prefer their water straight from the tap. If this is true of yours, you may want to try a cat drinking fountain. It works like a fish pump, recycling the water up and over a spigot to fall freely into a bowl. Make sure you change the water frequently and take apart and clean the entire fountain regularly.

Clean Litter Box. No one likes a smelly potty and cat's noses are far more sensitive than humans. Scoop at least daily, 2x/day is preferable. Most cats prefer unscented clumping litter. Non-clumping litter should be changed every other day. Clumping litter can be changed every 2- 3 weeks. Also consider the location of the box. A high-traffic location will not do. Cats feel vulnerable when they go to the bathroom and can easily be startled. Make sure that they have an "escape route" for if and when this occurs. You don't want to scare the kitty permanently away from that box. And, if you have a multiple-cat household, the suggestion is one litter box per cat plus one more to lessen any conflict between kitties.



Warm Places to Sleep: Cats enjoy a warm sunbeam. When toasty and comfortable, cats tend to relax and bathe. Bathing or grooming themselves is the way they check their body for blemishes. And, like yoga, they stretch while they groom, increasing blood flow to all body parts. Make sure they have a safe, comfortable place to escape any stressors they might face elsewhere in the house or yard. Many cats like to perch up high so you might want to invest in a tiered "kitty condo" unit.

Time with You! Your cat likes you and wants to be with you, even though her body language may sometimes say otherwise. She is a very social creature. Therefore, you are one of her best stress-busters. As stated earlier, changes in the environment can stress her out so prepare her for any changes coming down the pike by increasing the time you spend with her. By adhering to a regular feeding schedule, providing her with regular daily play times and giving her excess amounts of love and cuddling, your kitty should be able to face changes more successfully and peacefully.

Behavior Resources:

Marin Humane's [Behavior & Training](#) department conducts various cat workshops. Sign up on our [Cat Behavior](#) (MarinHumane.org/oh-behave/cats) page for the next available class series. We also have **Cat Behavior Consultants** who are available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6284 or CatBehavior@MarinHumane.org.

More information about cat behavior is available by clicking [here](#) or on our website at MarinHumane.org/oh-behave/handouts.

