**Why does my cat do that?**

Quite often we are puzzled by some of the behaviours our cat(s) exhibits. In order to try and understand why cats behave the way they do, we need to understand what motivates them.

1) **Cats need to feel safe and secure in their home environment.** A cat that feels safe in their environment can move freely and engage in their daily routines (e.g. using the litter box, eating/drinking, playing, resting, sleeping, scratching) without feeling fear of any threat to their well-being. A cat that feels secure in their home perceives their environment as one that is familiar and predictable and lets them choose where and sometimes who, to engage with as part of their routine. This gives them a sense of control over their environment. Why is this important to them? By nature, cats are solitary hunters who live in an established territory. Because of this their relationship to their environment is a matter of life and death to them. If they can't hunt successfully, they die. In the wild if they find themselves in an unfamiliar territory, they could be attacked by predators or other cats.

 **What can happen when a cat does not feel safe and secure in their home?**

* The cat might avoid the litter box (they may not feel safe because of its location or type).
* The cat might hiss, spit and/or growl if approached.
* The cat may hide.
* The cat may mark their territory by urinating and/or scratching.
* The cat may exhibit some compulsive behaviours (e.g. over grooming, overeating or becoming lethargic and loss of appetite.
* The cat may show fear-based aggression.

**How can I create a sense of safety and security for my cat(s)?**

* Maintain predictability and familiarity in the home (this means having the same familiar people, animals, smells, sounds, objects and routines every day). If there are going to be changes in the cat’s environment, the cat needs to be exposed to these changes gradually, until the cat is comfortable with the changes.
* Provide resources that will help the cat feel in control of their environment (e.g. multiple litter boxes, scratching posts, food/water stations, hiding spaces and high resting spaces).
* Provide sufficient territory within the home. This is very important in multi-cat homes, but also necessary for single cat households. Unlike humans and dogs, cats require both horizontal space and vertical space. Creating this space may take some creativity but doesn't have to be expensive. Some examples include: bookcases, shelves, cat trees, milk crates, dressers, desks, chairs, tables, counters, cushions on the floor, or a sturdy cardboard box.
* Engage the cat on a daily basis with interactive play sessions. This will help to decrease their stress and increase their confidence.

**Cats and Stress**

 Below are some examples of what can cause stress for cats.

* unfamiliar guests
* new baby
* new pet
* being left alone with a cat sitter
* vacuum cleaner
* construction
* vet visits
* old age (cat's senses start to deteriorate)
* new scents (perfume/cologne/room deodorizers)
* outdoor cats hanging around
* new furniture
* mice or other animals in the walls/attic
* new work schedule for the owner
* workers in the home
* loud noises (inside or outside)
* illness
* smells of other animals brought into the home on clothing
* a person in the home displaying strong, atypical emotions

 It is important to understand and remember that cats (and dogs), don't think in terms of right and wrong. They only think in terms of what will fulfill their needs. For example: if a cat isn't using their litter box, they do not understand that their actions are wrong, they are simply responding to their environment and choose to eliminate elsewhere in the home that best meets their needs. What we perceive as "misbehaviour", is actually the cat's response to their environment.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Issue | Cat's Perspective | Owner's Perspective |
| Litter box scooped every other day | Box is filthy/doesn't meet needs | Box is clean enough |
| Closed litter box in closet | What a nightmare/no escape route | Perfect privacy |
| Change in owner's schedule | What is happening? | No big deal |
| Waking owner at 5am | I'm feeling playful/hungry | Can't you see I need to sleep |
| Cat pees on owner's bed when they go away on vacation | I'm scared + stressed. Meshing my scent with theirs gives me comfort | He/she is so spiteful |

2**) Cats need to be stimulated in their home environment.** In the wild, cats will hunt 10-20 times/day. They use mental and physical energy to stalk, pounce, and eat the prey. Indoor cats still need this stimulation. When cats are chasing, pouncing and catching an object they feel more confident (successful hunters).

**What can happen when cats are under-stimulated?**

* Play aggression towards people or other animals in the home.
* Climbing/scratching throughout the home.
* Over activity at night.
* An increase in the cat trying to dart outside.
* Or conversely the cat may become bored and depressed which can lead to lethargy, overeating and other compulsive behaviours.

**How can I provide stimulation for my cat(s)?**

 *Interactive Play*-Try to schedule at least two 15 minute play sessions daily. The best interactive toys are what are called cat charmers. It looks like a fishing pole with an object attached to a long piece of string. Some cats will chase it in the air, like chasing a bird. Other cats prefer chasing the object as it gets dragged across the floor, like chasing a mouse. A cat's natural routine is to Hunt-Eat-Groom-Sleep, so scheduling feeding time after a play session will help them achieve that routine.

 *Environmental Enrichment-*Another way to provide stimulation for the cat is with various objects that the cat can interact with and explore. Examples include: scratching posts, window perches so they can view the outdoors, tunnels/paper bags/cardboard boxes to explore, toys that the cat can bat around or try to catch, treat dispensing balls, cat videos.

**3) Cats need to exercise their natural instincts.** The most common of a cat's natural instincts that can lead to what humans perceive as behavioural issues are:

* *Scratching*-Cats scratch for many reason: to stretch, express excitement, alleviate stress, mark territory, and to remove any dead nail sheaths on their paws.
* *Climbing and Resting on high surfaces*-Cats feel the most safe and secure when resting, observing and sleeping from a high vantage point.
* *The need to expend energy*-Cats have a natural instinct to hunt.
* *Eliminating in a clean/safe/secure area-*Cats release scents when they go to the bathroom. These scents can attract unwanted attention from other cats and other animals, because of this, cats feel vulnerable when eliminating. They don't want the area where they eliminate to have a pre-existing scent. They do want the location to be in an open area with a good vantage point and multiple escape routes.

**What can you do to resolve many behavioural issues?**

* Recognize that the cat is displaying natural behaviour
* Redirect the cat to an appropriate surface or object
* Deter the cat from the inappropriate surface or object.

*Scratching*-This is a natural behaviour for cats. The solution is not to stop the cat from scratching, but rather to redirect the cat to an appropriate scratching surface such as a scratching post or pad. At the same time, deter the cat from scratching at the inappropriate surface. When a cat scratches they are looking for a tall, sturdy object that they can dig their nails into and get in a good stretch. A good example of this is a tree, however most of us do not have trees in our homes, but from a cat's point of view our furniture is tall and sturdy. Because of this the scratching post you offer the cat should be at least three feet tall, sturdy (will not wobble), and made of a rope material called sisal. Cats like to scratch in certain locations. For example: some cats scratch when they get excited. They might scratch the walls by the door when their owners come home, in this case it would make sense to put the scratch post near the door. If the cat is scratching a desk near a window, it could be that the cat is getting excited or stressed watching what goes on outdoors, in this case placing the scratch post near the window would be best. If the cat is scratching a couch, place the post near the couch. Deterring the cat from scratching inappropriate items needs to be done humanely. This can be achieved by putting something sticky or slick on the item (e.g. put double-sided tape on the item or a tight-fitting sheet around the furniture).

*Climbing*-The same principle applies to cats who jump on or climb in locations that the owner feel s is inappropriate. For example: if the cat is allowed on counters, you need to make that surface one that the cat doesn't want to explore. Try putting the two-sided tape on a piece of cardboard and putting that cardboard on the counter when not in use. Another suggestion is to fill cheap aluminum baking trays with an inch of water and putting them on the counters. The idea is to make the cat not want to explore that area. Usually after a few attempts the cat will realize that the counters are not tempting and will consider them a "no-go zone". At the same time the owner needs to be able to offer suitable areas for the cat to climb, ideally somewhere close to the counters. You could put a perch by a window, let the cat have access to the top of the refrigerator, or make a shelf or desk just outside the kitchen a cat friendly space by placing a blanket and some treats on it.