



**Humane
World for
Animals™**

Formerly called the
Humane Society of the United States
and Humane Society International



Guide to Cat Behavior Counseling

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Foreword

By helping people keep their pets, we can reduce intakes at local shelters and rescues, preserve the human-animal bond and build connections within our communities.

Here's an example:

A cat owner calls a shelter or rescue and says, "I'm struggling with my cat. She keeps peeing all over my home and if I can't solve this issue, I may need to surrender her."

One response may be, "I'm so sorry to hear that. We don't have any space right now. Have you tried these other shelters and rescues? Or we can put you on our waiting list."

But imagine if that same caller received the following reply from your organization: "I'm sorry to hear that your cat is peeing all over your home. That sounds very frustrating. I'm really glad you called our organization because we can provide you with free cat behavior counseling that is likely to resolve the problem so that you can keep your cat."

Cat behavior counseling is a natural extension of your work to protect animals in your community. In many cases, the cat is already in a great home, so your task is to make sure the cat remains there by working with the owner to resolve the behavior issue.

The goal of this guide is to train you to become an effective cat behavior counselor so that your organization can provide this invaluable resource to cat owners in your community. This is a three-step process:

- Understand the underlying principles of why cats behave the way they do

- Understand how to effectively communicate with cat owners
- Understand how to assess and resolve specific behavior issues

In addition, this guide provides two sample case studies on how to implement a community helpline for cat behavior issues.

Why do we need this manual?

Shelter and rescue staff may feel they're "winging it" when it comes to advising on cat behavior, and there's a lack of confidence that the information they provide owners is accurate and comprehensive. Although some shelter staff and volunteers have tips to offer cat owners, they may not have opportunities for owners to receive continuing education and develop a more thorough understanding of cat behavior. And then there are all the misconceptions about how to resolve cat behavior issues, which often make matters worse. Misconceptions such as "Just squirt him with a spray bottle" or "Give her a tap on the nose" or "Confine him in a crate until he uses the litter box."

To keep more cats in their homes, Humane World for Animals offers this guide, as well as an online Cat Behavior Counseling course, available at humanepro.org/catbehavior. With this knowledge, your organization will be able to adopt "Let's keep them in their homes" as its new mantra.

A new perspective

A cat owner calls your organization and says, “I want to give up my cat. She keeps destroying the furniture with her claws.” What’s your reaction?

It’s common for us in the sheltering and rescue field to become jaded by these calls and assume the worst about the owners—that they shouldn’t have gotten a cat to begin with, that they have no connection to their cat or that they’re just passing their problems on to others. But the truth is likely very different.

It’s important to remember that people most often surrender their pets when they’re in crisis and have often spent many months arriving at their decision. Here’s a typical situation where a cat owner has reached her wit’s end and calls to ask about surrendering her cat:

Andrea has had Jumpers for six years and he’s always scratched her furniture, but Andrea wasn’t too concerned because the furniture was old. A year ago, she moved in with her fiancé. Within a few days, Jumpers began scratching the arms of her fiancé’s couch. Her fiancé was upset, so Andrea spoke to a friend who advised her to smack Jumpers with a newspaper when he started to scratch the couch. Her family told her to get rid of Jumpers because he was causing tension with her fiancé. Andrea couldn’t

imagine giving up Jumpers, but she didn’t know what to do.

Soon, Jumpers had destroyed parts of the couch, and Andrea’s fiancé told her that if Jumpers ruined the newly purchased couch, he had to go. Andrea tried to keep Jumpers confined in her room so he wouldn’t scratch the new couch, but he started to cry. After a few weeks, she let him out under supervision. One day she forgot he was outside of the bedroom when she left for work, and when she returned home hours later, the new couch was badly scratched. Andrea and her fiancé had a huge fight, and she felt she had no choice but to give up Jumpers. In the message she left with the local animal shelter, she said, “My cat is ruining my couch, and I have to give him up.”

No one wants to be judged, especially when others don’t know the full story. And yet, we find ourselves judging people based on a few sentences without knowing anything else about their situation. When cat owners call us prepared to give up their pets, it’s vital that we listen, remain compassionate and avoid making judgments.

As we discuss in this guide, sometimes a new perspective makes all the difference in whether a cat sleeps in their bed or in a shelter cage that night.

—Matt Wildman



Understanding cat behavior

In this section we explore a few big ideas and concepts that serve as the framework for understanding cat behavior.

The first big thing to understand about cats is that they need to feel safe and secure in their home environment.

Cats who feel safe perceive the home environment as a territory where they can move freely and engage in their daily routines (eliminating, eating/drinking, playing, resting, sleeping, scratching) without fear of any threat to their well-being.

Cats who feel secure perceive the home environment as a territory that is familiar and predictable, and which lets them choose where (and in some cases, with whom) to engage in their daily routines. Familiarity, predictability and choice enable cats to feel a sense of control over their environment, which coincides with this sense of security.

Here's what can happen when cats don't feel safe and secure in their home:

- They might avoid the litter box if they don't feel safe while eliminating in it, either because of its location or type.
- They might hiss, spit and/or growl if approached.
- They might hide.
- They might mark their territory by urinating and/or scratching.
- They might exhibit compulsive behaviors such as overgrooming and overeating as a means of coping with the stress of not feeling safe and secure. Or the stress might cause them to become lethargic and possibly lose their appetite.
- They might show fear-based aggression.

How do we create a sense of safety and security for cats?

- **Maintain predictability and familiarity in the home environment.** This means that the cat can expect to experience the same familiar people, animals, smells, sounds, objects and routines every day. If there are to be any changes in the home environment, the cat must be exposed to the changes gradually, proceeding at the cat's comfort level.

Q: Why are familiarity and predictability so important for cats?

A: By nature, cats are solitary hunters who live in an established territory. Therefore, their relationship to their physical environment is a matter of life and death. If they're not familiar and comfortable in the environment, they can't hunt successfully. If they can't hunt successfully, they die. Also, in the wild, if they find themselves in unfamiliar territory, they could be attacked by other cats or predators.

- **Provide adequate resources so the cat feels in control of their environment.** For example, throughout the home, there should be multiple litter boxes, scratching posts, food/water stations, comfortable hiding spaces and high resting spaces. No matter what the cat needs to do—eliminate, rest, eat, scratch or just observe their surroundings—they should have a choice of where to do it.
- **Provide adequate territory within the home.** This is particularly important in multi-cat households but necessary for single-cat households as well. When we talk about territory in the home, we need to think vertically. Cats, unlike humans and dogs, inhabit space both horizontally and vertically. Vertical space should go beyond cat trees (which not all cats will use and may be cost-prohibitive for many owners). Creating vertical space requires just a little bit of creativity in using existing space or adding some new vertical space without stretching an owner's budget.
- **Engage the cat in daily interactive play sessions to decrease stress and increase confidence.** The importance of interactive play is discussed on p. 7.

Examples of vertical space:

- Bookcase
- Shelf
- Cat tree
- Dresser
- Desk
- Chair
- Table
- Couch cushion on floor
- Sturdy cardboard box
- Counter
- Milk crate

Case study #1: Taino and the dog

Taino the cat was temporarily fostered by a man named Matt, who lived in a studio apartment with two other cats and two medium-sized dogs. Taino was first confined to a bathroom for a few weeks and was then given access to the rest of the small apartment. Matt's apartment, in addition to being small, had no furniture other than a mattress on the floor. Taino immediately got along with the other cats, and the dogs ignored him. Matt assumed that Taino would adapt well to the home.

After a few days, Taino started hissing at one of the dogs any time the dog walked within a few feet of him. Sometimes Taino would run up to the resting dog and swat him a couple of times on the head. When the dog played with one of the other cats, Taino would get in between them. With his hair on end and his tail swishing, he hissed and growled. Matt thought that Taino was being silly and neurotic because Matt knew the dog posed no threat to him. Over the next few days, the behavior intensified, but Matt assumed Taino would eventually adjust.

One night, Taino attacked the dog seemingly "out of the blue," launching himself at the dog to bite and scratch him. The dog became aggressive in defending himself, making matters worse. Matt tried to intervene, but every time he managed to pull Taino off the dog, Taino attacked again. While trying to pull the animals apart, Matt's hands were severely bitten by Taino. The aggression continued for a few minutes, and eventually Matt managed to get Taino into the bathroom. The dog had several puncture wounds, but nothing too serious. Taino had a gash in his stomach, requiring three stitches. Matt ended up in the emergency room and was unable to use his hands for two weeks because of the many deep puncture wounds.

Q: Why did Taino act this way?

A: He didn't feel safe and secure.

Taino considered the dog a threat and subsequently felt very unsafe in his new territory. Furthermore, the home lacked high resting and hiding spaces where Taino could feel temporarily secure. Taino acted on his need to feel safe and secure by

consistently hissing and swatting at the dog to let him know to keep away. But keeping the dog away was impossible in the small living space, so Taino continued to feel threatened. He ultimately resorted to attacking the dog. Cats under extreme stress will sometimes decide that the best defense is a good offense, as Taino did in this case. Here are a few more takeaways from this case:

- **Cats don't act "out of the blue."** There are always signs when a cat is uncomfortable in a situation. However, these signs might be subtle and easily misread. Any time a client says that something happened without warning be sure to ask follow-up questions to identify the precursor or trigger.
- **Cat and human perceptions often differ radically.** Matt perceived that his dog wasn't a threat to Taino and assumed that everybody would coexist in his home. From Taino's perspective, he was constantly on guard and wary of the dog. He had nowhere to feel safe and secure in this very constricted space.

Case study #2: Meowie and the baby

Terry describes her cat Meowie as a particularly social cat who loves people. So she was very surprised when Meowie's "entire personality changed," as Terry put it, after she brought her new baby home. She says Meowie now hides most of the day, and when she tries to pick her up to see the baby, Meowie hisses. Terry says, "She's never hissed before in her life."

Creating a sanctuary or safe room

A new cat who enters the home should be temporarily placed in a sanctuary or safe room where they can slowly adjust to their new territory. This quiet room should have hiding spaces and high resting spaces to help the cat develop a sense of safety and security. A sanctuary room may also be needed temporarily for a resident cat who suddenly feels threatened by changes in the home environment.

Q: Why is Meowie acting this way?

A: She doesn't feel safe and secure.

Think about what changed from Meowie's point of view. The familiarity and predictability of her home has been disrupted by new and unfamiliar people, sounds, smells, objects and routines. Meowie's entire world has been turned upside down, along with her previous sense of safety and security. It's no wonder that she hides in an attempt to make herself feel safe and hisses when she feels a loss of control at being picked up.

The second thing to understand about cats is that they need to be stimulated in their home environment.

Cats in the wild hunt 10 to 20 times a day, using mental and physical energy to stalk, pounce and eat prey. Owners must understand that their indoor cat still needs this mental and physical stimulation. Stimulation is also important because it can lead to a decrease in stress (just as it does with people), as well as an increase in the cat's confidence. When cats are chasing, pouncing and catching an object, they feel like successful hunters.

Here's what happens when cats are understimulated in the home. Many unwanted behaviors can emerge, including:

- Play aggression toward people or other animals
- Climbing and scratching throughout the home
- Overactivity at night
- An increased likelihood of trying to dart outside the home

On the other end of the spectrum, cats can become bored and depressed when understimulated, leading to overeating, lethargy and/or compulsive behaviors.

Cats perceive the world very differently

Many cat owners don't appreciate the extent to which human and cat perceptions of the world differ. When owners understand their cat's specific needs and view the home environment from their cat's perspective, they can begin to make sense of the behavior. This, in turn, increases the owner's motivation to resolve the problem because they realize the behavior isn't the cat's fault and the cat isn't acting intentionally to cause the owner grief.

Here are examples of these differing cat and human perspectives:

Issue	Cat's perspective	Owner's perspective
Litter box scooped every other day	This is filthy and contrary to my natural needs.	Clean enough
Closed litter box in closet	What a nightmare!	Perfect privacy
Newly adopted cat	An intruder!	A new friend!
Change in owner's schedule	What's happening?	No big deal
Cat wakes owner at 5 a.m.	I'm in a playful mood, and I'm hungry.	Can't you see I need to sleep?
Cat pees on owner's bed when owner goes away on vacation.	I'm scared and stressed, and meshing my scent with my owner's gives me some comfort.	My cat is so spiteful.

Keep in mind...

Cats' senses of smell and hearing are so much better than our own that it's beyond our ability to comprehend them. Therefore, the cat may be aware of a new smell or sound that threatens their sense of safety and security in the home, while we might have no idea that the smell or sound even exists. In other words, how we experience our home differs in substantial ways from how our cats experience the same home.



Stress is a cat's No. 1 enemy

Because cats are territorial creatures, the stability of their home environment is extremely important to their emotional and physical well-being. Even slight changes in the home can prevent a cat from feeling safe and secure. When cats feel unsafe and insecure, they experience stress, which ultimately leads to behavior issues. Here are examples of cat stressors:

- Unfamiliar guests
- New baby
- New pet
- Left alone with cat sitter
- Vacuum cleaner
- Construction
- Vet visit
- Old age (deteriorating senses)
- New perfume/cologne
- Outdoor cats
- New furniture
- Mice or other animals in walls
- New work schedule
- Workers in the home
- Loud noises
- Illness (feeling vulnerable)
- Smells of other animals brought into home on clothing
- Person displaying strong, atypical emotions

How do we make sure a cat is stimulated?

Interactive play

The easiest way is to tap into cats' hunting instinct by providing them with daily interactive play sessions. There are a variety of interactive toys, and a cat owner may have to experiment with a few before finding the one their cat most enjoys. The most common and effective interactive toys are fishing rod toys (a pole with a long string and feathers attached), wand toys (a pole with a long piece of felt or other material attached) and cat laser pointers. Cats prefer these toys because we're moving them, which makes the "hunt" unpredictable and engaging for the cat.

The cat will be particularly engaged in the play if the toy moves as if it was prey. For example, prey moves away from the cat or across their field of vision. (Prey doesn't frantically move right in front of the cat's face.) Often the most engaging part of the play for the cat is when the toy is slowly moving away from them or across their field of vision and the cat has the opportunity to stalk and pounce. Also, keep in mind that each cat is an individual with different play preferences. Some cats will prefer to play with a toy that moves through the air like a bird; other cats will prefer to chase a toy that slivers like a snake or moves like a mouse or a bug.

Active cats will need at least two, preferably three, 10- to 15-minute interactive play sessions a day. It's important, particularly with active cats, to schedule mealtimes immediately after play sessions as this simulates the cat's natural routine of hunt(play)-eat-groom-sleep. In other words, an active cat whose energy needs are being met will become much less active between these daily play sessions.

The importance of play for cats can't be overstated. The most common cat behavior "problems" are a result of cats being chronically understimulated in their home environment.

Environmental enrichment

There's another component to keeping a cat stimulated, known

"Moving at the speed of cat"

Clients are often unaware of just how slowly cats (re)gain a sense of safety and security. It's important to encourage clients to focus more on the progress they're making rather than the final result they want to see, which may take much more time than they initially expect. The client's job is to put into place all the components to help the cat feel safe and secure. The cat will determine the pace at which they begin to feel comfortable in the home.

as environmental enrichment. This entails providing the cat with various stimulating objects to interact with and explore, including:

- Scratching posts
- Window perches to view the outdoors
- Tunnels, paper bags and boxes to explore
- Solo toys that the cat bats around or tries to catch
- Food foraging options in the home, such as treat balls
- Cat videos (which some cats enjoy watching)
- Catios (cat patios) that allow cats to be outdoors while remaining safe

Case study #3: Trombone and José

José's cat, Trombone, is 2 years old. José loves his cat, but he's finding it increasingly difficult to live with him. Every morning at 5:30 a.m., Trombone pounces on José's feet and continues to do so even when José yells and throws a pillow at him. Trombone just runs away and repeats the behavior. José leaves for work at 9 a.m. When he returns home at 6 p.m., his home is usually a "disaster area," as he puts it, with unraveled toilet paper and knocked-over garbage cans. It takes José 15 minutes to clean up his apartment. As soon as he's finished, Trombone starts "attacking" José's legs and then runs away when José yells at him, only to repeat the behavior again. José says he's nearing his wit's end.

Q: Why is Trombone acting this way?

A: He's bored and understimulated.

Trombone is a young, active cat whose energy needs aren't being met. He doesn't have anything else to chase, so he meets some of his energy needs by pouncing on José's feet and then running away.

During the day, he attempts to occupy himself by watching things move as he knocks them over or unravels them. But what he really wants is something to "hunt," and José's feet and legs are what he has to settle for.

The third thing to understand about cats is that they need to exercise their natural instincts.

The most common natural instincts that can lead to what humans perceive as "behavior issues" are:

- **Scratching.** Cats scratch for many reasons: to stretch, express excitement or alleviate stress, mark territory (both visually and by scent), and remove the dead nail sheath.
- **Climbing and resting on high surfaces.** Cats feel safest and secure when resting, observing and sleeping from a high vantage point.

- **The need to expend energy.** As discussed previously, cats have a natural hunting instinct.
- **Eliminating in a clean, safe and secure area.** Because they're releasing scents that can attract unwanted attention from other cats and animals, cats feel vulnerable while eliminating. They don't want a preexisting scent where they eliminate, and they want the location to be in an open area with a good vantage point and multiple potential escape routes.

Follow these steps to resolve many behavior issues:

1. Recognize that the cat is displaying a natural behavior.
2. Redirect the cat to an appropriate surface or object.
3. Deter the cat from the inappropriate surface or object.

Scratching

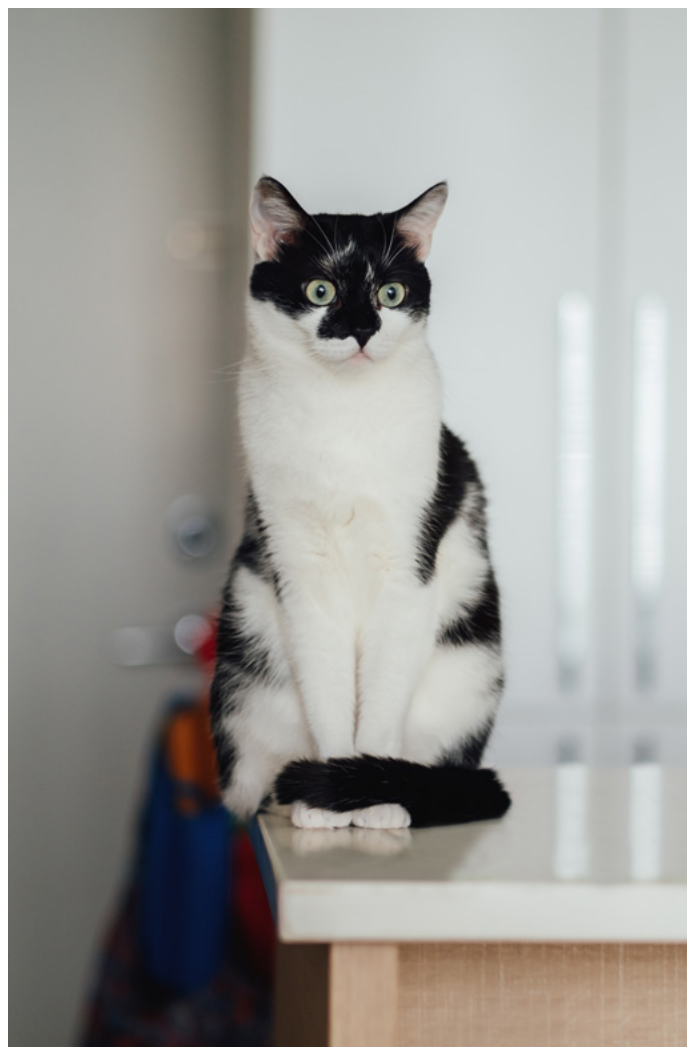
Scratching is a natural behavior for cats, as natural as breathing. Therefore, the solution isn't to stop the cat from scratching, but instead to redirect the cat to an appropriate scratching surface such as a scratching post or pad. At the same time, deter the cat from scratching the inappropriate surface.

When a cat scratches, they want a tall, sturdy object they can dig their nails into and get a good stretch. Think of a tree—tall and sturdy. Most of us don't have trees in our homes, but we do have furniture that's tall and sturdy. Usually the furniture is made of a suitable material for nail-digging, from a cat's point of view. That's why the scratching posts you offer must be high-quality, and they must meet the cat's needs. Otherwise, the cat is instinctively going to seek out an object that better meets their needs. The best type of post is at least 3 feet tall, sturdy (meaning it won't wobble) and made of a rope material called sisal, which cats love to scratch.

Cats also like to scratch in certain locations. Some cats primarily scratch when excited, so they might scratch the walls by the doorway when their people come home. Placing the scratching post by the front door makes the most sense in this case.

Cats also scratch to relieve stress—maybe there's a desk by the window that the cat scratches when they get excited or stressed after watching the comings and goings outdoors. In this case, the scratching post should be placed right by the window. Maybe the cat just loves scratching the couch, so the scratching post should be placed next to the couch.

From the cat's point of view, the wall, the desk and the couch are still excellent scratching surfaces. In addition to providing a replacement scratching post that meets the cat's needs, the owner must humanely deter their cat from scratching the wall, desk and couch. This is easily done using something sticky or slick, which cats don't like scratching. For example, double-sided tape or a tight-fitting sheet around the furniture can work.



Climbing on high surfaces

The same methodology applies for cats who jump on or climb in locations that their owners deem off-limits. If a cat isn't allowed on the counters, the counters have to become a surface that the cat doesn't want to explore. For example, the owner could cover one side of a piece of cardboard with double-sided tape and place it on the counters when they're not in use. After jumping on this sticky surface just a few times, the cat will realize that the counters aren't that tempting. An alternative is to fill cheap aluminum baking trays with an inch of water and place them on the counters when not in use. Cats don't like jumping in water, and very soon the cat will consider the counters a "no-go" zone.

At the same time, the owner must offer suitable areas for the cat to climb, ideally somewhere close to the counters. The owner could place a perch on the kitchen window, let the cat access the top of the refrigerator, or make a shelf or desk just outside the kitchen cat-friendly by placing a blanket and some treats on it.

Conclusion

Understanding cats' needs is the basis of effective cat behavior counseling. The underlying source of most behavior issues is one or more of the following:

- The cat is responding to not feeling safe and secure in the home environment. **Note:** This could also include illness or injury.
- The cat is responding to a lack of adequate stimulation in the home environment.
- The cat is exhibiting a natural behavior that should be redirected to an appropriate object.

Cats aren't enigmas. They behave in a rational manner in relation to their environment.

Cats are also extremely adept at communicating their emotional state. Understanding how they communicate is the topic of the next section.

Cats don't misbehave

It's important for pet owners to understand that cats (and dogs!) don't think in terms of right and wrong like humans do. They think in terms of fulfilling their needs. For example, cats don't scratch a scratching post because it's the right thing to do. They scratch it because they feel it's the best place to scratch in the home. Similarly, cats don't use the litter box because it's the right thing to do. If they're using the litter box, it's because it contains the substrate that best meets their needs and they feel safe when eliminating in this box. And if these same cats start to scratch or eliminate elsewhere in the home, they're not in any way understanding that their actions are wrong. They're simply responding to their environment and choosing somewhere else to scratch or eliminate that best meets their needs. So what we perceive as "misbehavior" is, in fact, a cat's rational response to their environment.



CATHY SCOLA/GETTY IMAGES



Cats are masters of communication

Pam Johnson-Bennett is one of the best-known cat behavior experts in the world and the author of many helpful books about cat behavior. Cats, she says, are “masters of communication.” Specifically, cats communicate through:

Scent. Pheromones are chemical scents released through facial rubbing, scratching (the pads of cats’ feet contain scent glands) and urinating. Facial pheromones are “friendly” scents, so cats rub their cheeks against other cats, people and objects when they’re feeling relaxed. By contrast, the releasing of pheromones in urine (urine marking) is an indication of stress, caused by other cats or another stressor in the environment.

Vocalizations. Cats make an impressive number of sounds to communicate, including friendly/welcoming sounds (such as purring, chirping, meowing and trilling) and sounds meant to create distance (such as hissing, spitting and growling).

Body language. Cats communicate with their eyes, ears, whiskers, tail, hair and posture.

Because cat behavior counseling is typically done over the phone and the counselor can’t observe the cat’s behavior in person, it’s particularly important to ask the client questions about the cat’s body language and vocalizations to assess the cat’s behavior and mindset.

Case study: Cat “attacks”

A cat owner states that every evening her cat “attacks” her legs about 10 minutes after she arrives home from work. The cat grabs her leg as she walks by and holds on until she shakes him off.

Sometimes the cat bites her leg, but not hard enough to cause pain or break skin. When we ask the client questions about the cat’s body language, she says that when she returns home from work her cat greets her with his tail and head held up high. He lets out a few chirps and rubs his head and body against her legs.

Given this description, it seems that the cat isn’t actually attacking his owner. Based on the cat’s body language, he’s happy and excited to see his owner when she returns home. His behavior is most likely play aggression because he’s understimulated after having nothing to do all day. The solution is to engage the cat in interactive play soon after the owner returns home from work.

Cat communication through body language

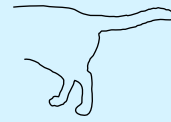
A happy cat



Friendly and content



Very happy to see you



Amicable, not fearful or aggressive



Alert, interested

A worried cat



Friendly, but unsure



Nonthreatening, unsure



Submissive

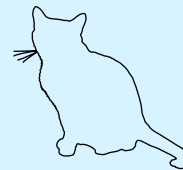
An angry or unhappy cat



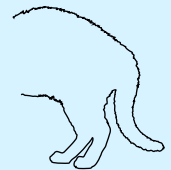
Angry



Potentially aggressive



Excited, angry or irritable



Aggressive (defensive)

Case study: Petting-induced aggression

There's a common behavior in cats known as petting-induced aggression. While being petted, the cat becomes overstimulated or uncomfortable with where they're being petted, how they're being petted or the length of the petting session. Seemingly out of the blue, the cat bites or scratches the person petting them. But this behavior almost never happens without warning.

The cat's body language prior to this bite or scratch most likely indicated that they were no longer comfortable with the situation. The body language might have been subtle, but it was there. It could have been the swishing of the cat's tail, the dilation of their eyes, a movement of the ears or whiskers, the bristling of their hair, a sudden vocalization or a glance back at the person. These subtle clues were the cat's way of trying to indicate their discomfort before taking action.

This behavior issue is readily resolvable once the owner learns how to read their cat's body language and to stop petting before the cat shows any signs of agitation. The owner should

pay attention to where the cat is most comfortable being petted (typically on the head, chin and maybe the back), and limiting petting to these areas of the cat's body. And, finally, the owner should figure out how the cat likes to be petted. Is it long, slow strokes, shorter scratches or something in between? With this new knowledge of feline body language, the owner will no longer view their cat's behavior as an upsetting mystery. The owner might even have a greater appreciation for their cat's great communication skills.

Conclusion

We're now well on our way to appreciating that cats make sense. Their behaviors are typically easily understood once we understand their needs, and their effectiveness as communicators provides us with lots of clues about how they're feeling.

Now we're ready to explore how we can most effectively communicate with cat owners to help keep cats in their homes.



The six keys to communicate effectively with cat owners

How we communicate with cat owners is just as important as what we know about cat behavior.

There are six keys to cat behavior counseling:

- 1. Use nonjudgmental and empathic communication with clients.** It's essential to develop a good relationship with the client so that the client views you as an ally and a source of support. If you and your organization are perceived positively, the client is likely to engage you in a lengthy conversation so you can properly assess the causes of the behavior issue, and the client is also likely to follow the advice you offer. Keep in mind that most people seek help when they're stressed, and they may speak negatively about their cats because of this stress, but this doesn't mean they don't love and care for their cats.

Place an equal emphasis on knowledge about cats and knowledge of how to most effectively communicate with clients.

- 2. Don't assume the client's description of their cat's behavior is accurate.** As a cat behavior counselor, you don't want to make premature assumptions, including that the client's description of their cat's behavior is accurate. For example, cat owners often misread their cats' behavior and label defensive behaviors such as hissing, growling or swatting as "attacking." Also, cat owners often mistakenly attribute human emotions and motivations (e.g., spite, anger, jealousy) to their cats, and it's important to not reinforce this type of language when speaking with the client.

If a question can be asked, then an assumption should never be made.

3. Ask the right questions to properly assess the situation.

Success with cat behavior counseling is contingent on getting as much accurate information as possible by asking comprehensive questions. Think of yourself as a detective, and asking questions is your sole investigative tool. While asking questions seems simple and straightforward, it can be the most challenging aspect of cat behavior counseling and requires practice.

Asking insightful and thorough questions enables a comprehensive investigation into the potential causes of the cat's behavior.

4. Provide sound advice based on an understanding of cats' needs. Successful cat behavior counseling entails a comprehensive and sophisticated understanding of cats' fundamental needs, assessing which of these needs aren't being met and determining how to provide for these needs. Cat behavior counseling isn't about having a "bag of tricks" and randomly offering suggestions.

Understand the cat's needs and how to ensure that the home environment meets these needs.

5. Be practical and respectful of clients' financial and time limitations. As previously noted, there's an important interpersonal component to cat behavior counseling, and the advice provided must take into account information not only about the cat, but also about the cat's owner. Of course, you always need to provide the best advice that will address the behavior issue, but you may need to tailor your suggestions and protocols to what you think the client can do and can afford.

Practical financial and time considerations must be taken into account when offering advice.

Why lending hope is so important

Cat owners typically reach out to shelters and rescues when they're at their wit's end. The behavior issue has often been happening for months, and the cat owner has already spoken to family, friends and neighbors. They've often received faulty or insufficient advice or have been told to just "get rid of the cat." At this point, the owner might be feeling demoralized. You need to counter this sense of hopelessness by sharing optimism that the situation can be resolved. When lending hope, it's important to remind the cat owner that they love their cat and have taken great care of the cat. For example, you might say, "It's wonderful that you've had him for seven years and given him such a great home. Clearly you must love him a lot. It would be such a shame to give him up. Let's work together to try to resolve this problem. OK?"

6. Follow up with clients. Following up with clients is essential! And if you have a positive first conversation, it opens the door to further conversations. There are three reasons follow-up is so important:

- The client may not have implemented some or all of the advice provided, and they may need a reminder and/or encouragement to do so.
- The client may have implemented everything that was advised, and yet there's been no subsequent progress in resolving the behavior issue.
- The client may need ongoing support if the problem is resolving but not as quickly as was hoped.

Assistance shouldn't be viewed as a one-time conversation, but rather a series of conversations in which the cat owner is provided with ongoing support and advice.

To explore these six concepts, we'll review a case study involving a cat owner named Cynthia and her cat, Pickles. Here's the message that Cynthia left on a cat behavior helpline:

“Somebody please tell me where I can take my cat. The cat keeps peeing in my kitchen sink. I was about to boil water for tea this morning, and my sink is full of pee. He's being spiteful. I love this cat, but he's nothing but trouble recently. Call me back, and tell me where I can bring him.”

Key #1 to cat behavior counseling: Use nonjudgmental and empathic communication

In cases like this one, the first step is to defuse the situation. By helping Cynthia calm down and get out of crisis mode, we can help her resolve Pickles' behavior issue. If Cynthia remains agitated and stressed, she's not likely to have the patience for a lengthy conversation, nor will she see the point of it because she wants to give up the cat. Our goal is to move Cynthia from crisis mode to a state where she's ready to have a productive conversation.

Empathize

Empathy is a key tool for helping a person get out of crisis mode. Here's what we could say to Cynthia: "I understand how frustrating that must be to have urine in your sink. No one wants to wake up to that. The good news is that litter box issues are usually resolvable, and sometimes the solution is actually fairly

simple. I realize you're very upset with Pickles, but it sounds like you also really love him, and I'd like to help you try to resolve the problem so you can keep him. Does that sound OK?"

Note that in our response to Cynthia's message, we're validating her emotions by empathizing with her frustration. Being nonjudgmental means that we're doing our best to empathize with the client's situation so that we can work with them to fix it. If we, as cat behavior counselors, aren't perceived as a source of support, the client won't take our advice, and the cat will suffer.

Note too that in our response to Cynthia, we offer hope that the problem can be resolved. This is also key in transitioning the client out of crisis mode. When the client understands that there's most likely a solution to the problem, they will often agree to a discussion with the goal of keeping the cat.

Be an ally

Imagine what would happen if we returned Cynthia's call and said, "You have no right being a cat owner if you're going to get so angry at your cat!" What would Cynthia's response be? She would almost certainly become defensive and either hang up or ignore our advice. She's already stressed and wants to remove the cat; an antagonistic response isn't going to make her reconsider her options. And of course, it's the cat who will ultimately suffer from this unproductive conversation.

A nonjudgmental approach is absolutely essential when speaking with clients. While we may feel frustrated by what a client is saying or doing, for the sake of a positive conversation and for the sake of the cat, it's essential that the client view us as an ally who is trying to help resolve the problem, not as a judgmental adversary.

Engaging in nonjudgmental and empathic communication with the client is the basis of successful cat behavior counseling.

Keep in mind that:

- People usually call for help when they're in crisis and are angry and frustrated. It's our job to defuse some of their tension and help them see that there's likely a positive resolution to the crisis.
- Almost all of us have at times become frustrated with our pets and can empathize with owners who are frustrated with their cats' behavior.
- The client may have other very stressful or upsetting things going on in their life, and this issue with the cat may have tipped their emotions so that they feel like they can't handle the cat anymore.
- This person is calling for help of some sort. At the very least, they want to find out where the animal shelter is. So you know that they have at least some concern for their cat and don't want the cat to be harmed.

When we empathize with people and talk to them in a nonjudgmental, compassionate manner, it sometimes almost miraculously transforms what seems to be a hopeless situation to one where the owner enthusiastically accepts the assistance we offer.

Key #2 to cat behavior counseling: Don't assume the client's assessment of their cat's behavior is correct

People often mistakenly attribute human emotions and motivations to their cats. It's important not to reinforce this

Observed behavior	Owner's assessment	The reality
Cat pees on owner's clothing.	Cat is being spiteful.	Cat is likely stressed and/or ill; and/or there's a problem with the litter box setup. (Cats avoiding the litter box often choose soft items as substrates to eliminate on. Stressed cats may also seek to mesh their scents with their owners' scents, which helps them feel more secure.)
Cat hisses at the new baby.	Cat is jealous.	Cat is fearful.
Cat hisses and swats when approached by people.	Cat is attacking. Cat is mean.	Cat wants to be left alone.
Cat pounces on people at various times throughout the day but is otherwise friendly and social.	Cat "suddenly attacks."	Cat is likely understimulated and bored and just needs playtime.

type of language. For example, clients might say that their cats are being angry, mean, jealous or—as Cynthia said—spiteful. At this point, we don't know what's going on with Cynthia's cat, Pickles, but one thing we do know is that he's not acting out of spite.

True or false?

When Cynthia says Pickles “keeps peeing in the sink,” she probably means it’s happening every day or at least every other day.

False. We have no idea how often Pickles is peeing in the sink until we ask more questions.

Because of these misperceptions, we shouldn't assume that a client's assessment of their cat's behavior is correct. And we shouldn't reinforce the potentially flawed assessment by using the same language as the client. For example, if the owner says, “My cat keeps attacking me when I walk by him in the morning,” use neutral language, such as, “Can you describe what the cat is actually doing when he shows this behavior?”

When responding to Cynthia's claim that Pickles is being spiteful by eliminating in the sink, we can say, “I understand that it may seem like he's being spiteful, but fortunately cats don't think like we do. He's not trying to upset you or show annoyance by this behavior. He's experiencing a problem, which is leading him to pee in your sink. We have to figure out what the source of the problem is.”

Key #3 to cat behavior counseling: Ask lots of questions to assess the situation properly

To provide effective cat behavior counseling, we need as much accurate information as possible about the situation. To get this information, we must ask comprehensive questions. Think of yourself as a detective with questions as your sole investigative tool. When Cynthia says, “My cat is peeing in the sink,” we don't want to offer her random suggestions to try to resolve the problem. Instead, we want to commence a thorough investigation into Pickles' behavior and home environment to understand why he's eliminating in the kitchen sink.

Let's use the case of Pickles and Cynthia to examine the depth of questions we must ask when consulting with a client.

Pickles: 6-year-old neutered male who has been in Cynthia's home since he was a year old.

After identifying the basic information about the cat (name, age, reproductive status, length of time in the home), the first set of questions we ask should focus on the behavior itself so that we understand exactly what the cat is doing. This is the foundation of all the other questions we will ask.

Questions to understand the behavior itself (with Cynthia's responses below each question in bold blue):

Q: Where and how often is Pickles eliminating outside the box?

A: In the kitchen sink a few times a week.

Q: Are there other areas of the home where he is also eliminating?

A: No.

Q: How often is he using the litter box?

A: All of the time, except for these incidents. He always defecates in the box.

Q: Does there seem to be a pattern as to when this behavior occurs? Time of day? When home alone?

A: Always late at night.

Q: How long has this problem existed?

A: Two to three months. He always used the litter box previously.

Now we have something to work with. If we didn't ask these initial questions, we'd be approaching this case with no basis on which to begin to understand why Pickles is eliminating in the sink.

Understanding why a cat avoids the litter box can be challenging because there are several factors to consider. To this end, we have a very useful framework for assessing and advising on cases pertaining to a cat's avoidance of the litter box:

The four reasons cats avoid the litter box*

When a cat avoids the litter box, it's a result of one or more of the following four reasons:

1. A medical issue
2. A problem with the litter box setup
3. Something or someone inside or outside the home environment causing the cat stress
4. Tensions among cats

Note that these reasons aren't exclusive; more than one of these reasons may apply to a single case.

**Assuming the cat is neutered. An intact male cat will often mark territory around the home by spraying. If a cat is intact and eliminating outside the litter box and/or exhibiting any other behaviors concerning to the owner (e.g., not getting along with other cats, showing forms of aggression to people in the home, trying to dart out of the home), the first step must be neutering. In the majority of cases, neutering resolves the behavior concern.*

Next, let's ask Cynthia questions about a possible **medical issue** as the source of Pickles' sporadic avoidance of the litter box.

Q: Has Pickles been to the vet recently?

A: No.

Q: Does he seem to be acting normally aside from this inappropriate elimination?

A: Yes. He's eating and drinking well; his activity level is good. His behavior hasn't changed during the last few months. There are no signs of blood in the urine and no signs of straining or discomfort eliminating.

Preliminary assessment: At this point we can't rule out a medical cause for the behavior because Pickles hasn't been to the vet, but from this initial information, it doesn't seem that this is the prime suspect.

Now we'll ask Cynthia questions about a possible problem with the **litter box setup**.

Q: How many litter boxes do you have?

A: One box.

Q: Is the box covered or open?

A: Covered box.

Q: Where is it located?

A: It's in the bathroom.

Q: What type of litter do you use?

A: It varies; whatever is on sale.

Q: How often do you scoop and clean the box?

A: A few times a week.

Preliminary assessment: There are some red flags here! The litter box setup might not meet Pickles' needs, and it could be the source of the behavior issue. (A proper litter box setup is discussed on p. 23. The box should be large and open, and it

should be located in an open, accessible area of the home that has multiple escape routes. The litter should be unscented and scoopable. The box should be scooped twice a day and cleaned every 10–14 days.)

Next, we'll ask Cynthia questions about **possible environmental stressors** that could be the source of Pickles' sporadic avoidance of the litter box.

Q: When the problem began, were there any changes in the home environment, big or small, that may have caused the cat stress?

A: Cynthia got a second cat, an 8-month-old spayed female, two months ago. Cynthia couldn't identify any other obvious sources of stress for Pickles; the home environment has seemingly remained stable and unchanged in the last few months except for the addition of the new cat.

Q: What's the home environment like?

A: It's a one-bedroom apartment on the first floor. It's a quiet household, just Cynthia and her partner and the two cats.

Q: How does Pickles interact with others in the home?

A: He's a social cat who enjoys being petted. He's always friendly and curious when guests visit. He gets a lot of petting but is rarely played with. Cynthia will sometimes toss a toy for him to chase.

Q: How does Pickles interact with the home environment?

A: He rarely hides. He enjoys resting on the top of the couch and on the kitchen table. Sometimes he will sit on the windowsill looking outside.



Q: Is there anything else in the home or outside of it that might cause him stress?

A: He watches outdoor cats. There are a fair number of them. He never appears agitated, though, just curious.

Preliminary assessment: The new cat and/or outdoor cats could be a potential stressor.

Finally, we'll ask Cynthia about **possible tensions among the cats** that could be the source of Pickles' sporadic avoidance of the litter box.

Q: How do you know which cat is peeing in the sink?

A: Pickles likes jumping up on the counters and the sink, and the other cat doesn't do this.

Q: How do the cats interact with each other?

A: They like each other. They play together, groom each other and sleep together.

Q: Does one cat seem to bully or intimidate the other?

A: No. If anything, Pickles plays rough with the other cat.

Preliminary assessment: It seems that the new cat isn't directly the source of the behavior issue, but the additional cat's presence may be indirectly related to the problem.

Based on our questions and the information we gathered, what conclusions can we draw at this point about the most likely reasons that Pickles urinates in the sink a few times a week during the night?

Here's an initial hypothesis. First, of the four reasons cats avoid the litter box, we can rule out inter-cat tension: This doesn't appear to be a factor in Pickles' case. We can't entirely rule out

a medical cause because Pickles hasn't been to the vet recently, but it seems unlikely that any potential issue would affect him only at night. If Pickles had a medical issue, we'd expect him to avoid the box at various times of the day. So we're not ruling out a medical issue, but for reasons we'll discuss, we might not advise an immediate vet visit.

By eliminating those factors, we're left with the litter box setup and a possible environmental stressor as potential causes of this behavior issue.

The litter box setup isn't good. It's a closed box with inconsistent brands of litter. The litter brands might be of poor quality. And because there's now a second cat using the box, the box is even dirtier. There's also a possible environmental stressor involving the outdoor cats, who would be more prevalent and obvious to Pickles at night when outdoor cats are often more active and roaming.

An initial hypothesis based on the preliminary information gathered would be that Pickles is uncomfortable using a covered, dirty box at night with the other cats in the neighborhood right outside his window. The kitchen sink offers a high vantage point, which might make him feel safe and secure when he eliminates.

We can arrive at this assessment only by asking many questions. This systematic approach to asking questions has allowed us to acquire and organize lots of useful information.

Key #4 to cat behavior counseling: Provide advice based on a thorough understanding of cats' needs

As discussed in Pages 5-10, a behavior issue typically indicates that one or more of the cat's needs isn't being met. For example:

- The need to feel safe and secure in the home
- The need to be stimulated
- The need to exercise a natural instinct

With this in mind, it's easy to see why understanding cats' needs is so crucial to assessing behavior issues.

In the case of Pickles, we've identified some unmet needs that may be leading him to urinate at night in the kitchen sink. We identified that his litter box setup doesn't meet his need for an open space with a consistent sand-like litter that is kept clean. The closed box might not meet his need for security, particularly at night when outdoor cats are roaming outside his home. And it seems, in general, that Pickles' need for stimulation isn't being met because he receives no interactive play.

If we can support Cynthia in meeting Pickles' needs, this behavior issue will likely be resolved.



Key #5 to cat behavior counseling: Take into account practical considerations regarding the client's time and finances when providing advice

As discussed in the first key to cat behavior counseling, it's essential to empathize with the client. Identifying with the client's situation is important because it helps guide us in the advice we offer. A client we've supported and treated with compassion is much more likely to reveal that money and/or time is an issue than a client who distrusts us because we used a judgmental tone. And this is important information because a major component of successful cat behavior counseling is being practical with our advice. Of course, we always need to provide the best advice for the issue, but we might need to tailor our suggestions and protocols to what we think the client can do and what they can afford.

This brings us back to the point about the client being in crisis. People who call while in crisis are currently feeling overwhelmed. The worst thing we could do is overwhelm the client with advice that may not be feasible. Each situation is unique, and a nonjudgmental approach will help us to better navigate how we can best help a specific client.

Let's examine this concept of being practical through the lens of Cynthia's and Pickles' situation.

In the course of our conversation with Cynthia, she revealed that money is an issue; she doesn't have much expendable income. We'll take this information into account when giving Cynthia advice. Below is the advice provided to Cynthia based on our assessment of why Pickles is avoiding the litter

box. Steps 1-8 are actions that Cynthia should implement immediately. These steps should be feasible despite her financial limitations. Steps 9-10 are advice we can offer to Cynthia if the behavior issue continues even after she follows our first set of recommendations.

1. Scoop the box twice a day.
2. Remove the cover from the box.
3. Add a second open box in or as close to the kitchen as possible.
4. Purchase an unscented, scoopable litter.
5. Engage Pickles in interactive play two times a day to help him cope with any stress he might be feeling.
6. Cover windows at night so he does not see the outdoor cats.
7. Clean the urine with an enzymatic urine cleaner.
8. Put a stopper in the kitchen sink and fill it with two inches of water at night to deter Pickles from standing in the sink to eliminate.
9. Provide or create more vertical space.
10. Visit the veterinarian.

Let's focus on steps 9 and 10.

Ideally, there would be more vertical space in the home (in addition to the top of the couch and the kitchen table), as an increase in high resting spaces could help Pickles feel a greater sense of safety and security in the home. However, Pickles already has some places he can rest up high, and we're already giving Cynthia a lot to do. So this one piece of advice—which is probably not essential to solving the issue—can wait until it's necessary.

Our decision not to advise a vet visit immediately gets at the heart of why it's important to be practical.

It's established protocol among cat behaviorists that any time a cat is avoiding the litter box, the first step is to take the cat to the vet. And if Cynthia had told us that money wasn't an issue, we would certainly suggest a vet visit. We would also suggest a vet visit regardless of Cynthia's income if we suspected that Pickles had a medical issue that required immediate treatment. For example, if Cynthia said that Pickles was having trouble urinating, was routinely avoiding the litter box, had blood in his urine or cried while eliminating, we'd immediately recommend a vet visit.

But that's not the case with Pickles. Therefore, there are other practical matters to consider. First, we have to remember that Cynthia is very close to surrendering Pickles. She's also overwhelmed by the behavior issue. Finally, money is a concern. Given all of this, and the fact that Pickles doesn't appear to be in distress, it doesn't seem prudent to advise Cynthia to spend money she doesn't have for a medical problem that may not exist.



Rationale for not referring Pickles to the vet immediately:

- Cynthia is on a tight budget.
- Based on the information we collected, there's a good chance that the cause of the behavior isn't medically related.
- Although we're not vets, Pickles' health doesn't appear to be in danger, and there's time to see if environmental changes resolve the behavior issue.
- If the behavior issue continues despite the implementation of our advice, then a vet visit is necessary.

Key #6 to cat behavior counseling: Follow up with the client in a timely manner

Following up with clients is essential! If we have a positive first conversation, we've opened the door to further conversations. It's important to keep in mind that the conversation we have with a client may be the first of many conversations, and sometimes it takes people time to think things through. If we're nonjudgmental, the client is much more likely to consider what we're saying.

As the phone call with Cynthia ended, we informed her that we would follow up with her in seven to 10 days, and in the meantime, she was welcome to contact us if needed.

The follow-up calls are as necessary as the initial call for the following three reasons:

1. Cynthia may not have implemented some or all of the advice provided, and she might need a reminder and/or encouragement to do so. It's common for clients not to implement all the advice initially offered. The moment of crisis with the cat passes, and other things in life tend to get in the way. A follow-up call can motivate clients to implement the advice because they realize they really do have our support. On the follow-up call, we might also discover that there is some barrier to implementing the advice. For example, maybe Cynthia's partner refuses to allow a litter box in or near the kitchen, or maybe Cynthia doesn't have the money to purchase any litter that's not on sale.
2. Cynthia may have implemented everything that was advised, and yet there's been no progress in resolving the behavior issue. Pickles is still peeing in the kitchen sink a few times a week. Or maybe because of the water in the

sink, he's now peeing on the counter. At this point, we need to reassess the situation. Let's say that Cynthia has purchased a second open litter box, switched to unscented scoopable litter and started scooping the boxes twice a day, but Pickles is still eliminating in the sink. Now we can guess that Pickles' issue might not be related to the litter box setup. At this point, a vet visit is a priority. We need to diagnose or rule out a medical issue.

3. Cynthia might need ongoing support if the problem is improving very slowly. Some cat behavior issues (such as long-standing elimination outside of the box) can take weeks or months to fully resolve. Cynthia needs to know that we're here to provide ongoing assistance and emotional support.

We should be confident that the case of Cynthia and Pickles will have a successful outcome. Cynthia clearly loves Pickles, and now that she better understands him and his needs, she's motivated to implement our advice. Since we had a great first conversation with Cynthia, she realizes that we're here to support her and to ensure that Pickles remains in the loving home that she provides. We should plan to call her in a week to get an update and, if needed, to continue to work with her to resolve Pickles' avoidance of the litter box.

Conclusion

Congratulations! You now not only have an excellent understanding of the principles underlying cat behavior, but you also know how to communicate effectively with cat owners so you can assess the behavior issue and ensure that your advice is implemented. You're now ready to turn your attention to assessing and resolving specific cat behavior issues.



MINISERIES/GETTY IMAGES



Assessing and advising on common cat behavior issues

The following informational charts are designed to help you do two things:

- 1. Accurately assess the most common behavior issues**
- 2. Provide appropriate advice**

Avoiding the litter box

There are four possible reasons that a cat avoids the litter box:

1. A medical issue
2. A problem with the litter box setup
3. An environmental stressor(s)
4. Tensions among cats

When working with a client whose cat is avoiding the litter box, this framework can guide both the questions you ask the client and the advice you recommend. The charts below will help you to problem-solve with clients. Note that there can be multiple causes for a litter box issue. For example, a cat may have a medical issue in

addition to avoiding the box because of its location or its dirtiness.

In all cases, advise the client to spay or neuter the cat. This will help address a variety of issues that may be causing the cat to avoid the litter box. And always advise the client to clean the urine with an enzymatic urine cleaner, which is sold at pet stores and online.

Common cat behavior issues:

- Avoiding the litter box
- Scratching inappropriate objects
- Climbing/resting on inappropriate objects
- Play aggression
- Petting-induced aggression
- Fear-based aggression
- Not getting along with other cats

The cat avoids the litter box because of a **medical issue**

What are medical issues that could lead a cat to avoid the litter box?	<p>Urinary problems, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diabetes • Kidney stones • Hyperthyroidism • Renal failure • Crystals • Urinary tract infection • Cystitis <p>Fecal problems, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritable bowels • Constipation • Impacted anal glands • Megacolon
Why might a cat avoid the litter box because of a medical issue?	<p>The cat might:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associate the pain/discomfort of elimination with the litter box and avoid it. • Have to eliminate often and immediately but can't get to the box quickly enough. • Not want to eliminate because of discomfort or pain, so the cat avoids elimination until they can no longer do so and then eliminates wherever they happen to be. • Eliminate as soon as they feel discomfort.
What are indications that a cat may have a medical issue?	<p>The cat might:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strain to eliminate. • Have blood or discoloration in urine/feces. • Have hard or soft stools. • Vocalize while eliminating. • Make frequent visits to the litter box. • Avoid the litter box.
What advice should I give the client?	<p>Take your cat to a veterinarian. Tests such as a urinalysis, fecal analysis, bloodwork and/or X-rays can help diagnose the problem.</p>

The cat avoids the litter box because of a **problem with the litter box setup**

What are problems with the litter box setup that could lead a cat to avoid the litter box?	<p>A cat might dislike the litter box setup because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's dirty. • It's too small. • It's covered. • The sides are too high. • It's in a bad location. • It has litter box liners. • There aren't enough boxes. • It's too close to food/water. • The litter type is undesirable.
Why might the cat avoid the litter box because of a poor setup?	<p>Cats need to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have minimal scent with the litter box. • Feel safe and secure when eliminating. • Feel physically comfortable in the box.

TABLE CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

The cat avoids the litter box because of a problem with the litter box setup	
What are indications that a cat has a problem with the litter box setup?	<p>The cat might:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate right near the box. • Stand on the sides of the box to eliminate. • Quickly jump out of the box after elimination. • Avoid the litter box.
What advice should I give the client?	<p>Create a litter box setup your cat will love! Here are some things to consider:</p> <p>Type of box. Offer a large open box (at least 1.5 times the size of the cat) with sides that the cat can easily climb.</p> <p>Location of box(es). The box(es) should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be in a quiet area where the cat isn't likely to be startled, but also in a location that's easy for the cat to access and not out of the way. • Be in a location where the cat can see the space all around them. It should allow for multiple avenues of escape. It should not be in a closet, in a tight corner or under a sink. • Not be near any appliances that suddenly turn on and off. • Not be near food/water. • Be dispersed throughout the house, with one box on each floor. <p>Number of boxes. Make sure to have at least as many boxes as there are cats in the home.</p> <p>Type of litter. Cats prefer unscented, fine-grained, clumping/scoopable litter because it's the most like sand.</p> <p>Cleaning protocol. Scoop the box twice a day and thoroughly clean the box every 10–14 days.</p>

Cats prefer a large, open litter box that is located in an open area of the home. They also prefer unscented, scoopable litter. Why?

- Cats are desert animals, and the desert is like a giant open litter box. The sand has no scent and is fine-grained—just like unscented, scoopable litter. That's why it's the best substrate for cats.
- When cats eliminate, they release scents that might attract other cats and animals to their location. They are therefore placing themselves in a vulnerable position, so they need to be able to see their surroundings. They also want escape routes in various directions—just in case another animal approaches. That's why a closed box, or even an open box that is in an inaccessible or closed-off area, doesn't feel right to a cat.
- Cats bury their waste to avoid attracting other animals to their location. In the desert, they have the option of eliminating in varied locations, not just one. That's why a single box or a dirty box represents a problem for the cat: It goes against their basic survival instinct.
- It's also worth noting that a cat's sense of smell is several dozen times better than our own. If a dirty box smells unpleasant to us, imagine what it must be like for a cat to enter a dirty box!

The cat avoids the litter box because of something that is causing the cat stress

What are sources of stress that could lead a cat to avoid the litter box?	<p>Environmental stressors might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new baby. • Outdoor cats. • New routines. • New people/animals. • Loss of family member (human or animal). • New sounds (e.g., construction). • New objects in the home (e.g., furniture). • Being let outdoors. • New smells.
Why might stress lead to an avoidance of the litter box?	<p>The cat might eliminate in a different part of the home to restore their scent if they don't feel safe and secure. In some cases, the cat will seek to use their scent to mask an unfamiliar scent. In other cases, a cat might eliminate on materials that contain the smell of their owner (e.g., clothing, bedding) because meshing their scent with their person's scents comforts them.</p>
What are indications that a cat may be experiencing stress leading to an avoidance of the litter box?	<p>The cat might eliminate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Near windows or doors leading to the outside if the stressor is coming from outdoors (e.g., outdoor cats). • On their person's bedding or clothing. • In other areas of the home where they experience stress. • In areas other than the litter box if the litter box area is where they experience the stress.
What advice should I give the client?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep the cat indoors. • If the source of the stress can be identified and removed, then remove it. For example, if the issue is an outdoor cat, use blinds to deter the cat from seeing the outdoor cat. If loud guests scare the cat, confine the cat in a comfortable room when guests arrive. • If the source of the stress can be identified but can't be removed (e.g., a baby), help the cat gradually feel comfortable with the stressor by engaging the cat in play and providing highly valued treats or food near the source of stress. This will help change the cat's association of the person/thing from negative to positive. Take the process slowly if the cat seems uncomfortable. • Make sure the cat has lots of interactive play and environmental enrichment, which will help reduce their stress. • Provide the cat with safe hiding spaces, high resting spaces and a safe room.

The cat avoids the litter box because of **tensions among cats in the home**

<p>Why would tensions among cats lead to avoidance of the litter box?</p>	<p>Cats are territorial animals. Problems arise if they feel in competition with each other for resources or don't feel they have adequate space. Cats also have hierarchies, and this can lead to bullying and jockeying for position.</p> <p>Therefore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One cat might intimidate another cat from using the litter box. For example, a bully cat might physically block the pathway to the box or pounce on the bullied cat when they use it, which leads the bullied cat to find some other location to eliminate. • Cats who are competing for territory in the home might spray throughout the home.
<p>What are indications that tensions among cats may be leading to an avoidance of the litter box?</p>	<p>The bully cat(s) might:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spray on various objects in the home. • Sit or lie in areas of the home that block access to the litter box. • Stare (often subtly) at the bullied cat (the bully cat is often the silent one, while the cat who vocalizes and swats is the one being bullied). <p>The bullied cat(s) might:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spray on various objects in the home. • Eliminate in open, more accessible areas of the home where they're less likely to be surprised and pounced on by the bully cat (living and dining rooms are often open areas where a bullied cat will eliminate).
<p>What advice should I give the client?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure all cats in the home are spayed or neutered. • Make sure that you have at least as many litter boxes as cats, plus one more. Make sure they are all large, open boxes. Place the boxes in different areas of the home where the cat has multiple avenues of escape and can see all around the area when eliminating. • Have lots of high resting spaces in the home to increase the amount of territory so the cats don't feel in competition with each other for space. • Have more than enough resources for the cats so they don't feel in competition. Resources include litter boxes, scratching posts, high resting spaces, food/water bowls, toys, playtime and one-on-one time with you. • Work on establishing positive relationships among the cats. (See Page 32 of this guide.)

Scratching inappropriate objects

Use the following framework to assist cat owners in training their cats to use scratching posts.

The cat is scratching objects that they shouldn't	
Why do cats scratch?	<p>Cats have a natural need to scratch, and scratching serves many purposes.</p> <p>Cats scratch to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stretch while digging their nails into something sturdy. • Reduce stress or express excitement. • Indicate their territory by placing a visual marker on the object, along with a scent (cats have scent glands on the pads of their feet). • Remove the dead part of the nail, allowing for a new, sharper nail to emerge. <p>Scratching itself isn't the problem. Scratching can become a problem if the cat doesn't have a suitable and appropriate scratching option and/or has become conditioned to scratching an inappropriate object in the home, such as furniture, walls or carpeting.</p>
What advice should I give the client?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure the cat has a quality scratching post. The post should be at least 3 feet tall, sturdy (it shouldn't wobble when the cat scratches it) and made of a type of rope called sisal. If the client can't afford a good scratching post, sturdy cardboard or wood can be used. • Place the post where the cat likes to scratch. If the cat likes to scratch the couch, place the post right next to the couch. Some cats prefer to scratch horizontally (most scratch vertically); if this is the case, either place the scratching post on its side or purchase a corrugated cardboard scratching pad. • Encourage the cat to use the scratching post by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Rubbing catnip on the post. ◦ Engaging the cat in interactive play right near the post so they will scratch it while playing. ◦ Scratching the post yourself (cats like to mimic our behavior). ◦ Note: Don't place the cat's paws on the post. This may frighten the cat or scare them from using the post. • Deter the cat from scratching the inappropriate object(s) while the cat learns to use the scratching post. A good deterrent for furniture is to wrap it with a tight-fitting sheet. Double-sided sticky tape, available at pet stores, can also be used, as well as a thick, plastic shower curtain. Once the cat is routinely using the scratching post, you can remove the deterrent. • Trim your cat's nails once a month.

Climbing/resting on inappropriate objects

Use the following framework to help cat owners train their cats to climb and jump on appropriate surfaces.

The cat is climbing/resting on inappropriate objects in the home	
Why do cats climb and like high resting spaces?	<p>Cats climb and rest in high places because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They feel most safe and secure when they can view their surroundings from above and when they can rest/sleep on a high surface. • Climbing itself is an enjoyable activity. <p>Climbing and resting on high surfaces can become a problem if the cat doesn't have suitable and appropriate high resting spaces and/or has become conditioned to climbing and/or resting on an inappropriate object. This could include furniture, counters, cabinets, closets and more.</p>
What advice should I give the client?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the cat with suitable alternatives for climbing and perching. The best options are cat trees, although these can be expensive. You can create high resting spaces using space that already exists. Shelves, cabinets, desks, chairs, dressers and closet space can all be adapted for a cat. Place a comfortable blanket in the location and routinely leave treats or catnip there to entice the cat. Pay attention to where the cat already likes to rest, and try to provide another option nearby. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Note: High resting spaces can range from a few inches off the ground to the ceiling. A cushion on the floor may be a suitable height for some cats. Other cats may want to be as high as possible. • Deter the cat from climbing/perching on the areas that you want to keep off-limits. Possible deterrents include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Double-sided tape (cats don't like walking on sticky surfaces). ◦ Aluminum trays filled with a couple of inches of water (cats don't like walking in water). ◦ Carpet runners or car mats with the spiky nubs face up (cats don't like walking on spiky surfaces). ◦ Once the cat is routinely using the new high resting space, remove the deterrent.

Play aggression

A cat who exhibits play aggression is understimulated and is acting on their natural need to stalk and pounce, albeit on an inappropriate target (a person or other cat).

Here's a typical example of a cat exhibiting play aggression:

Andrew rescued Hamlet when he was a kitten two years ago. Hamlet loves Andrew and often seeks his attention. Andrew's only concern is that several times a day, often in the morning and evening, Hamlet pounces on Andrew's legs and feet when he's walking around his apartment. Hamlet also stalks and pounces on Georgie, the other cat in the home. Hamlet and Georgie often sleep near each other and otherwise seem to get along. Andrew makes sure that he pets Hamlet every day, but he doesn't get much of a chance to play with him.

Use the following framework to help cat owners deter their cats from play aggression.

The cat is exhibiting play aggression	
What is play aggression?	<p>Play aggression isn't actual aggression because the cat isn't trying to harm another cat or person, nor is the cat fearful or upset. Play aggression is usually exhibited by a cat who isn't getting enough physical stimulation and is looking for some way to burn off energy. Chasing or pouncing on a person or another cat and then running away when the other animal/person reacts is a good way to be active when there are no other options.</p> <p>Play aggression can be annoying and upsetting for other cats and people in the home who are the targets. No one wants to be pounced on or latched onto suddenly, and cats' claws can cause injury.</p>
What are indications that a cat is displaying play aggression?	<p>The cat might:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be a friendly and social cat who sometimes stalks and pounces on or chases another cat in the home. • Be a friendly and social cat who sometimes stalks and/or pounces on a person walking by, or pounces on a person while they're sitting down or sleeping. • Run away once the targeted cat or person reacts (with a scream or yell). • Cause superficial scratches but not significant injury. • Exhibit this behavior in the mornings and evenings (when cats have the most energy).
What advice should I give the client?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify when the cat is most likely to show play aggression, and engage the cat in a 10- to 15-minute interactive play session around this time. The cat should have at least two interactive play sessions a day. Feeding the cat a meal following each play session will make the cat relaxed and likely to sleep following the play session and meal. • Provide the cat with other types of environmental enrichment to keep them occupied. These can include window perches, cardboard boxes or paper bags to explore and a rotation of solo toys to play with. • If the cat tends to pounce on feet or legs when a person walks by, get the cat out of this habit by tossing treats or toys when walking by the cat, or distract the cat with an interactive toy before the cat shows any initial reaction.

A fishing rod toy, one of the best types of interactive toys, is particularly useful for engaging cats exhibiting play aggression.

Petting-induced aggression

This is another common type of aggression. In this case, the cat becomes agitated or uncomfortable while being petted and swats or bites as a result.

Here's a typical example of a cat exhibiting petting-induced aggression:

Midge is described by her owner, Jennifer, as a friendly, social cat who enjoys being petted. However, sometimes while Jennifer is stroking her back, Midge turns around “out of the blue” and bites her on the hand. The bites are more annoying than painful, although a few times while being scratched on her chest, Midge has scratched Jennifer, and these scratches did hurt.



Use the following framework to help cat owners deter their cats from petting-induced aggression.

The cat lashes out while being petted	
What is petting-induced aggression?	<p>Petting-induced aggression occurs when a cat is petted in an area that makes the cat feel vulnerable (such as the cat's belly), becomes overstimulated and/or agitated as a result of the petting, or doesn't like being petted on that part of their body.</p> <p>Petting-induced aggression can be annoying and even upsetting for the cat's owner, who might not understand why the cat is exhibiting this behavior and could misinterpret the behavior as there being something wrong with the cat.</p>
What are indications that a cat is displaying petting-induced aggression?	<p>The cat might:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be friendly and social, and sometimes like being petted, but sometimes swats or bites at the person's hands or arms while being petted. • Cause superficial scratches or bites, but typically not any significant injury.
What advice should I give the client?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay attention to where the cat likes and doesn't like to be petted on their body, and only pet them where they're comfortable. Most cats are comfortable being petted on the tops of their heads, backs of their necks and chins. Some cats are also comfortable with their backs being petted. Most cats don't like having their bellies or chests petted. • Pay attention to how the cat likes to be petted and only pet them in the ways they're comfortable with. Some cats like to be petted with quick, short strokes and others with slower, longer strokes. • Pay attention to warning signs that the cat is becoming agitated. Warning signs include tail swishing, hair on the back rising, skin twitching, the cat looking back at the person doing the petting, sudden vocalization and shifting of position. Once you have this information, stop the petting well before the cat shows these warning signs. For example, if the cat starts swishing their tail after two minutes of petting on their back, stop the petting at 90 seconds. Over time, the length of the petting can be gradually increased so the cat slowly becomes more comfortable with petting for longer periods of time. • Provide the cat with twice-daily interactive play and other types of environmental enrichment to keep them occupied. Cats who are understimulated are sometimes more likely to show petting-induced aggression.

Fear-based aggression

Most cat aggression is fear-based. Understanding how to make a cat feel safe and secure in their territory is often the key to resolving this behavior. Cats can be fearful because they're ill or injured or because of an upsetting change in the home, which from a human's point of view might seem minor or wholly insignificant.

Here are some typical examples of cats exhibiting fear-based aggression:

When Peggy is alone with her owner, Joann, she is described as the "sweetest cat." However, anytime Joann has guests visit, Peggy "goes crazy." She hisses and growls, and if anyone comes within 5 feet of her, she runs toward their legs and starts swatting and biting. The situation is so bad that Joann rarely has guests visit.

James brought a new furniture set into his house yesterday. Now his cat, Bella, is "flipping out," pacing and growling. When James tried to comfort her, she bit him on the hand.

One specific type of fear aggression is redirected aggression. This happens when cats are suddenly very scared by something which they can't get to the source of (such as an outdoor cat, or a scary, sudden sound), so they instinctively go into fight mode and attack whoever is nearest to them, person or animal. For example: Denise was talking to her friend on the phone while she prepared to feed her cat, Smokey. In the process she knocked over a glass pitcher that landed on the floor and shattered. Denise screamed and Smokey attacked her leg, causing deep puncture wounds and scratches.

Also related to fear aggression is pain-induced aggression. A cat who is ill or in pain may react aggressively if approached or touched because they feel vulnerable. For example: Adrienne's cat, Buffy, is an indoor-outdoor cat and, unbeknownst to Adrienne, Buffy was badly scratched by another cat at the base of her tail. The wound abscessed, and when Adrienne went to brush Buffy, she unintentionally caused her pain. Buffy instinctively turned and bit her owner on the wrist, causing a deep puncture.

Use the following framework to help cat owners resolve fear-based aggression.



The cat is displaying fear-based aggression

<p>What is fear-based aggression?</p>	<p>Fear makes a cat feel vulnerable, and as a result, the cat may show aggressive behaviors. In some cases, fearful cats only attempt to harm someone if approached. In other cases, fearful cats acquire the mentality of "the best defense is a good offense" and attack.</p> <p>Fear-based aggression is upsetting and potentially dangerous for the cat's owner, who is often unaware of potential triggers that could be causing the behavior. For many owners, the behavior doesn't make sense and seems to happen "out of the blue."</p>
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The cat is displaying fear-based aggression

<p>What are indications that a cat is displaying fear-based aggression?</p>	<p>The cat:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhibits body language and vocalization that indicate stress and fear, such as hissing, growling, arched back, hair on end, hiding, swatting, etc. • Has experienced a change in the home environment that could cause stress, such as new people, pets, sounds, smells, objects, routines or the appearance of outdoor cats. • Seems to be ill; for example, the cat: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Doesn't eat or drink. ◦ Changes their litter box habits. ◦ Loses weight. ◦ Hides.
<p>What advice should I give the client?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the cat with a home environment that creates a sense of safety and security. (See Pages 5-10 of this guide for more information.) Try to identify the source of the fear. If it's something that can be removed or is temporary (e.g., maintenance workers in the home), confine the cat in a safe space until the trigger is removed. If it's something or someone that can't be removed, help the cat gradually feel comfortable with the stressor by engaging the cat in play and providing highly valued treats or food near the source of stress. This will help to change the cat's negative association. Take this process slowly if the cat seems uncomfortable. • If the cat is showing redirected aggression toward a person or other cat, immediately remove the aggressor cat to a quiet, safe room (if possible). If the cat is agitated, this may require using a thick towel to safely transport the cat without causing injury to yourself. Allow the cat as much time as needed in the safe room (hours, days, maybe even weeks) to regain their sense of safety and security. Slowly introduce them to the rest of the home and ensure that the trigger, if identified, has been addressed. Redirected aggression is often a one-time incident, and the behavior never happens again as long as the trigger is addressed. However, this behavior can be quite complicated and potentially dangerous; in this case, you should refer the cat owner to a professional. (See Page 37 of this guide.) • Engage the cat in gentle interactive play and see if they respond favorably. This play will help reduce their stress. • If you suspect a medical issue (if the cat is showing pain-induced aggression), refer the client to the veterinarian. <p>If the situation doesn't improve and the cat is a risk to family members and/or other pets, seek professional assistance from a certified cat behavior consultant or a veterinary behaviorist. (See Page 37 of this guide.)</p>

Not getting along with other cats

Use the following framework to help cat owners encourage their cats to get along. Sometimes owners need only try a few simple steps to help cats who previously felt tense around each other coexist peacefully. Other times, cats must be introduced slowly or even reintroduced.

When introducing cats who haven't yet met each other or reintroducing cats who don't get along, the most important thing to explain to the client is that most cats can learn to get along or at least tolerate each other, but this is often a slow process that requires patience.



The cats in the home aren't getting along

Why don't cats get along sometimes?	Cats are territorial creatures. Although they can develop close bonds, most cats are initially wary and distrustful toward other cats. In some cases, cats can develop trust and feel safe around each other on their own, but in other cases, feelings of distrust or fear intensify over time. Cats usually don't work things out when they feel distrustful and/or fearful of each other; instead, owners must take proactive measures to resolve this situation.
What behavior issues can arise when cats don't get along?	Unwelcome behaviors include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active bullying, which can affect the bullied cat's quality of life (e.g., eating less, withdrawing, overgrooming from the stress and other medical issues). • Inappropriate elimination in the home (either marking or avoiding the litter box by a bullied cat). • Active fighting among the cats.
What are indications that the cats aren't getting along?	The cat(s): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routinely hiss, growl and/or swat when near each other. • Leave urine and/or feces around the house. • Fight. • Show a change in routine (e.g., eating less, hiding more).
What advice should I give the client?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the vertical space in the home. Cats often don't get along when they feel in competition for territory. By increasing the vertical space, you're increasing their territory. • Make sure there are more than enough resources so that the cats don't feel in competition with each other. This includes feeding/water bowls, litter boxes, scratching posts, hiding and high resting spaces, individual attention and playtime. • Have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats, plus one more. Make sure they're open boxes and are placed in open areas where a cat won't feel trapped. • Give the cats a reason to like each other. When they're near each other and are coexisting peacefully, offer them highly valued food or treats so they develop positive associations with each other. • Play with them to reduce their stress. Play is also important when one cat is very active and bothers the less active cat. • If needed, slowly reintroduce cats. (See tips on Pages 34-35 of this guide.)

When do cats need to be reintroduced to each other slowly?

Use this chart to help determine when a slow reintroduction of two or more cats is needed or when other steps might resolve multi-cat tensions

Reintroduction needed	Reintroduction not needed
The cats don't relax around each other; one or more becomes agitated and hisses or growls when they see each other.	The cats might show signs of agitation, but they tolerate each other. They engage in their normal activities, although they might keep their distance.
One or more cats routinely attacks the other; there's already been an injury, or it's a major concern. You've ruled out play aggression.	<p>One or more cats is being play aggressive.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The "aggressor" sometimes shows relaxed, appropriate behavior with the other cat, especially during midday when cats tend to be less active. If the "attacking" happens primarily in the morning and evening but not during midday, there's a good chance the behavior is play aggression. • If the "aggressor" is understimulated, there's a good chance it's just play aggression.
One or more cats has withdrawn, often hiding and showing other signs of stress (e.g., poor appetite, vomiting, avoidance of the litter box).	The cats show signs of affection occasionally (e.g., lying near each other, grooming each other, playing together).

Examples of when a reintroduction is and is not needed

Use these scenarios as a guide when advising clients whose cats are experiencing tension with each other.

Reintroduction needed	Reintroduction not needed
A couple goes on vacation, and the wife's parents stay at their home to care for their two cats. The parents bring their own cat and confine her to a bedroom. One night, the parents' cat escapes from the bedroom. When one of the resident cats sees this intruder, she is so frightened that she attacks the other resident cat. They are quickly separated. Although these two cats were very close in the past, now whenever they get a peek at each other through a doorway, they both immediately hiss and growl. This behavior has continued for two weeks since the original incident.	<p>A 3-year-old cat regularly chases the 10-year-old cat in the home. The older cat is very agitated by these encounters and often winds up trapped in a corner swatting at the younger cat. This behavior happens primarily after 6 p.m. every night. Other times the younger cat walks by the older cat and leaves her alone. The owners play with the younger cat a couple times a week.</p> <p>(In this case, an understimulated cat is finding an outlet for his energy by chasing the older cat. The resolution to this problem is lots of interactive play and environmental enrichment. The cats should be kept apart when no one is home.)</p>

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Examples of when a reintroduction is and is not needed

Use these scenarios as a guide when advising clients whose cats are experiencing tension with each other.

Reintroduction needed	Reintroduction not needed
<p>Three months ago, a new cat was brought into the household. Since then, the resident cat's behavior has changed drastically. She used to be an outgoing, social cat, but now she spends most of the day either under the bed or on top of a dresser in the bedroom. The new cat often enters the bedroom and stares at her or lies in the middle of the bedroom floor, in which case the resident cat occasionally eliminates under the bed. The cats' owners have noted that the resident cat has been losing weight and vomiting several times a week.</p>	<p>Six months ago, the owner adopted a 5-year-old cat to join her household with her 7-year-old cat. The two cats don't get along. They never interact positively, and a few times a day the owner hears hissing. Sometimes they swat each other in passing. There haven't been any other physical altercations, and both cats are eating well and using the litter box. They both enjoy their various resting spaces.</p> <p>(The resolution to this situation is to increase the territory by adding vertical space and to give these cats a reason to like each other. Several times a day, offer them highly valued treats or food in the same vicinity. Toss treats to the cats anytime they are resting somewhat near each other or coexisting peacefully.)</p>

Reintroducing cats to help them get along

Take these steps when two or more cats are experiencing tension and conflict that requires them to be temporarily separated and then reintroduced. These steps are also useful for introducing two cats who have never met.

Step 1: Isolation	<p>Isolate the cats from each other for as long as needed. The longer they're isolated from each other, the more likely you'll have success in the next steps. Ensure that they're all getting plenty of attention and playtime. You could alternate the areas in which they're confined so that they get used to being in all areas of the home without the other cat(s) present. Switch their bedding so they get used to each other's smells. Don't move on to any further steps until all the cats are showing calm, relaxed behavior.</p>
Step 2: Positive associations: food	<p>Try this activity when the cats are likely to be hungry. Secure a sturdy baby gate, one that is 3 to 4 feet high, in the doorway of the room where one cat is confined. Cover the baby gate with a sheet so the cats can't see each other. Be prepared with highly valued treats or food that you know the cats really love.</p> <p><i>Note: It's essential that the cats have a free choice whether or not to observe each other. You can lure the cat(s) near the baby gate with treats or play, but don't pick up the cat(s) and bring them to the baby gate, as this will cause stress.</i></p> <p>Remove the sheet for a moment or two until the cats see each other. In a happy voice, say "Good cats!" and toss them all a treat, and then cover the baby gate with the sheet. This is easier to do if there's a second person to assist, but a single person can do it. Repeat this activity five to 10 times in a row a few times a day. If you see that the cats aren't reacting to the presence of the other cat(s) and are eating the treats, you can gradually increase the amount of time that they see each other.</p> <p>The key to this process is keeping the interactions very brief and positive. Don't wait for one of the cats to show stress; instead, end the interaction on a positive note before any signs of stress.</p>

Reintroducing cats to help them get along

Take these steps when two or more cats are experiencing tension and conflict that requires them to be temporarily separated and then reintroduced. These steps are also useful for introducing two cats who have never met.

Step 3: Positive associations: play	<p>When step 2 is going well, you can begin to engage the cats in interactive play at the same time. You don't want the cats to use the same toy, so have one toy in each hand or ask someone else to assist you. First, play with them while you stand next to the gate so the cats are near each other but still separated. Keep the play sessions short. Always stop the play on a good note (before there are any negative interactions) and reward the cats with a treat. If things are going well, gradually increase the amount of time you play with them. After some time, if the cats enjoy the play and don't react negatively to each other, you can begin to play with the cats, still using two toys, without the gate in the way.</p>
Indications that one or more of the cats is stressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent hissing or growling toward the other cat. A hiss here or there isn't a concern, so long as the cat is otherwise showing some positive indications listed below. • Distancing themselves so they don't see the other. For the new cat, this may mean hiding in their room. For the resident cat, this may mean running to another room. • Stressed body language. In particular, look for a swishing tail, ears flattened back against the head or turned sideways, raised hair on their back, crouching or slinking away. <p><i>Note: When you see these signs, go slower with the process. If one or more cats show a particularly high level of stress, go back to step 1. It's not a setback. It just means that the process is going to take longer.</i></p>
Positive indications that show the cats are developing comfort/trust with each other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating the treats in the presence of the other cat • Playing with a toy in the presence of the other cat • Ignoring each other and going about their own business on the opposite sides of the baby gate • Touching noses through the gate, playing footsies under the gate, and/or rubbing their bodies against the gate <p><i>Note: When you see these signs, you can increase the amount of time the cats see each other as well as decrease the distance between them.</i></p>
Step 4: Supervised direct interaction	<p>At this point, you can give the cats supervised time together without the baby gate. Reward them with yummy treats for any positive or neutral interactions. At the slightest indication of a negative interaction (such as stalking, chasing or pouncing), distract and redirect the cats with a toy. As with steps 2 and 3, end the interaction on a positive note. Then gradually extend the amount of time that you allow the cats to be in the same area under close supervision. When the cats have repeatedly, over at least several days if not weeks, had positive or neutral interactions without showing signs of stress, they're ready for unsupervised time together.</p>

Conclusion

Congratulations! You now have the cat behavior knowledge that's necessary to successfully assist cats and their owners. Following is a sample case information form you can use when speaking with clients. It provides detailed questions to ask cat owners regarding their behavior concerns, along with a framework for organizing the information you collect.

The following document provides useful questions to ask clients about the common behavior issues discussed in this guide. Please note that this isn't a comprehensive list.

Cat behavior case information form

Stated behavior problem: _____

How long the behavior has existed: _____

Basic information

Cat's name: _____ Age: _____ Sex: M/F Spayed/Neutered: Y/N

How long has cat been in home: _____ Where the cat came from: _____

Household information

Other pets in household (name, age, sex, s/n): _____

People in household: _____ Ages of children: _____

Home environment information

Size of home: _____ Is cat kept strictly indoors? _____

How much interactive play is the cat getting daily? _____

From the cat's point of view, is the home cat-friendly (e.g., are there high resting spaces, hiding spaces, scratching posts, other environmental enrichment)? _____

Type of household (quiet, loud, busy): _____

Any changes in the home recently, big or small, that may have stressed the cat (e.g., new people/pets, schedules, sounds, smells, objects)? _____

Avoidance of litter box

Urination and defecation outside the box? How often is the cat avoiding the litter box? How often is the cat using the litter box? Where is the cat eliminating outside the box? Is there any noticeable pattern as to when the cat eliminates outside the box? (Time of day? Home alone?)

Has the cat been to the veterinarian recently, and was a medical issue discovered? Is there reason to think the cat may be in discomfort when eliminating?

How many litter boxes? What kind of boxes are they? Where are they located? What type of litter is used? How often are they scooped/cleaned?

Have there been any changes in the home, big or small, that may have caused the cat stress? Any other possible sources of stress for the cat?

Do the cats get along with each other? Is it possible that one cat is bullying another cat?

Scratching issues

What item(s) are being scratched? Are there good scratching post alternatives? Where are they located? Are there current deterrents in place?

Inter-cat tensions

What is the behavior you are observing? Who seems to be bullying whom? How often? When did the problem start? Are there litter box issues or other behaviors associated with the problem? Do the cats ever have positive interactions with each other? Does each cat have adequate territory and resources? Is there adequate daily stimulation for each cat? Has the client taken proactive steps to resolve the issue?

Aggression issues

What is the cat doing? When did this behavior begin? When is the behavior occurring? Apparent triggers for behavior? Severity of behavior? Vet visit made? Proactive steps taken by client to resolve issue?

Advice offered

When follow-up call should be made: _____

Knowing when professional help is needed

It's important to remember that despite all our knowledge and enthusiasm, there will be cases that require professional assistance from a certified cat behavior consultant or a veterinary behaviorist. This is often the case when a cat is causing, or potentially could cause, significant injury to a person or another animal in the home.

As cat behavior counselors, we can probably handle basic aggression cases, such as play aggression, petting-induced aggression and fear-based aggression (as long as the aggression isn't unpredictable or causing significant injury). There's a big difference between a cat who bites or scratches only when cornered and a cat who chases someone down the hallway and lunges at their leg. Similarly, there's a big difference between two cats who swat or hiss at each other when passing and a cat who viciously attacks another cat on sight.

If a case makes you uncomfortable or nervous, go with your instinct and advise the client that professional help is needed. Ideally, you can create a partnership with professionals in your community so you can ask their advice and refer clients as needed.

Certified cat behavior consultants: A certified cat behavior consultant is certified by the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants. To become certified, an individual must demonstrate a solid grounding in knowledge and experience, with the following minimums suggested: four years and 500 hours of experience in cat behavior consulting; four years of coursework, seminars, mentorships and additional education in the IAABC's seven core competencies; and a working knowledge of learning theory and other concepts. There's no official school or program to become a certified cat behavior consultant, but consultants must meet these criteria. IAABC's website, iaabc.org, is an excellent resource for finding certified cat behavior consultants.

Veterinary behaviorists: These are veterinarians who have achieved board certification in the specialty of veterinary behavior. In other words, they're vets with a tremendous amount of knowledge about behavior and can use their expansive knowledge of both behavior modification and veterinary medicine to treat animals with complicated behavior issues. Information on veterinary behaviorists, including how to find one in your community, is located at dacvb.org. Note that veterinary behaviorist consults are typically very expensive.



Delivering cat behavior counseling to your community

Now that you possess a comprehensive understanding of cat behavior and how to effectively communicate with cat owners, you will want to consider how best to deliver this service to the people in your community who need it. The most impactful way to prevent cat homelessness is to reach people with cats before they're having behavior problems that reach a crisis point. There are many ways to do this; following are a few models to consider.

1. Provide a helpline and market the service to the community. (See the two case studies below.)
2. Follow the Pets for Life model, which uses door-to-door, block-by-block community outreach to build trust-based relationships with people and establish an ongoing presence in the community that ultimately makes a huge impact. Visit humanepro.org/petsforlife for more information.
3. Offer an Animal Help Desk like that of the Nevada Humane Society, which offers a variety of assistance to people facing challenges with keeping their pets. Visit nevadahumanesociety.org/get-help for more information.
4. Enhance a current behavior program; for example, by adding a cat behavior counseling resource to an existing dog training community resource.

Below are two case studies of implementing a helpline. As you'll see, it's a simple process with a very big payoff in terms of the number of cats who remain in their homes.

Case study #1: Helpline run by a shelter

Type of organization

Private shelter handling approximately eight calls per week

Recipients of this service

Any cat owners in the community with a cat behavior concern

Service delivery method

Program supervisor: The pet retention and special project coordinator is responsible for assisting clients who contact the helpline.

Indirect involvement of other staff or volunteers: Information and charts from this guide are reviewed with other shelter staff to give them a thorough basic knowledge of the most common cat behavior issues. This prepares them to advise a cat owner who enters the shelter seeking cat behavior counseling when the counselor is unavailable.

Program logistics

The helpline phone is the number of the program supervisor's office phone (a landline). Callers are instructed to leave a message. The program supervisor contacts the callers in the order received unless a case seems particularly urgent. The helpline message includes details about when the helpline is open and states that messages will be returned on the days that the helpline is open. The message gives callers an email address to use if the matter is urgent and can't wait a day or two (if the program supervisor is off on the day of the call).

Marketing the program

The shelter's website features a banner advertising the helpline to all cat owners with behavior questions or concerns. A special Facebook page was created for the helpline. The shelter's general Facebook page also advertises the helpline. Brochures and flyers are distributed at community events and at several vet offices and pet stores. The other shelters and rescues in the community know about the program and are encouraged to refer cat owners to the helpline.

Note on statistics

It's important to keep statistics to assess how effectively the program solves cat behavior issues and ultimately decreases the number of cats who are surrendered. (See the form on Page 39 of this guide for items to track.)

Case study #2: Helpline run by a rescue organization

Type of organization
Rescue group handling approximately 10 calls per week

Recipients of this service
Any cat owners in the community with a cat behavior concern

Service delivery method
Program supervisor: Adoptions coordinator, who is a volunteer of the rescue group

Program logistics
The helpline phone is a mobile phone paid for by the rescue group on a \$25/month plan. Callers are instructed to leave a message, and the volunteer contacts the callers in the order received unless a case seems particularly urgent. Calls are returned on the same day unless the volunteer is unavailable and deems the call not urgent.

Marketing the program
The municipal shelter, various private shelters and other rescue groups in the community refer cat owners to the helpline, both those inquiring about surrendering their cat because of a behavior issue and adopters who are concerned about behavior



issues. A local low-cost spay/neuter clinic and several reduced-cost veterinarians have brochures advertising the helpline. Also, all callers who contact the rescue group to ask about surrendering their cats because of a behavior issue are referred to the helpline.

Statistics
It's important to keep statistics to assess how effectively the program solves cat behavior issues and ultimately decreases the number of cats who are surrendered.

Here's how the shelter and rescue group track their statistics.

Month	Number of clients assisted	Type of behavior issue (litter box, scratching, inter-cat aggression, other aggression)	Successful resolution	Pending cases	Cat(s) surrendered	Outcome unknown

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Additional resources

The following websites offer additional useful information on cat behavior issues:

- American Association of Feline Practitioners: catvets.com/cat-owners/brochures
- HumanePro: humanepro.org/catbehavior (includes a link to the Cat Behavior Counseling online course, a companion to this guide)
- Adopters Welcome manual and appendices: humanepro.org/adopterswelcomemanual
- Indoor Pet Initiative: indoorpet.osu.edu/cats/resources
- Pam Johnson-Bennett: catbehaviorassociates.com



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Our mission

Together, we tackle the root causes
of animal cruelty and suffering to
create permanent change.



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