Stress and Your Cat

Our cats experience stress like we do, too. Maybe it’s for different reasons, but the results are the same. Here’s how you can help.

By Pam Johnson Bennett

During my feline behavior seminars, I always hear giggling whenever I begin discussing stress. Many people are amused at the possibility of a cat experiencing stress. As you glance over at your sleeping kitty stretched out on the chair, she may appear as if she doesn’t have a care in the world. What could a cat possibly get stressed over? Plenty!

Stress is such a sneaky little culprit. We as humans are repeatedly warned about the effects of stress. It works its way into our lives, taking a toll on our physical and emotional health. And, whether you realize it or not, pets can and very often do suffer those same effects.

The Causes of Stress

First, let’s look at the things that are stressful to cats. Many seem obvious, but some might surprise you. Cats hate change. The bigger the change, the more it worries cats. Major upheavals in your life, whether they’re good or bad, impact your cat.

Let’s take moving to a new home, for example. Your cat watches as the change begins. You’re busy getting the family’s belongings packed and ready to go. She only sees that the world she knows is changing, and her owners are tense and have less time for her. Then without warning, she’s whisked off to an unfamiliar location. Her territory is gone forever. While you’re busy unpacking and decorating your new home, your cat begins the difficult task of trying to figure out where she fits in. With multicat households, it can be even worse because the delicate balance of individual territories becomes completely disrupted and must be renegotiated.

Events that we as humans view as blissfully happy—such as a marriage or birth of a baby—can stress out even the most well-adjusted, easy-going cat.

Although these big-time life events are obvious causes of stress, your cat can easily be forgotten should you and your family experience one. You know how your own world would get turned upside down during a crisis such as a death in the family, but imagine the extra stress on your cat: Not only does she lose a family member, she watches the rest of the family acting very strange.

As you mourn and grieve, your cat doesn’t understand the change in your behavior. Because you’re lost in grief, you don’t notice how stressed she’s becoming.

Even minor changes can be stressful to such a creature of habit. Rearranging furniture, a change in your job schedule, dating, the appearance of another cat outside, even switching brands of litter can have a negative effect on your cat.

One of my client’s cats became stressed when the all the worn-out scratching posts in the home were replaced with brand new ones. The owner thought that she was doing a good thing, but the cat was upset because she couldn’t locate her familiar, well-marked posts.

Don’t underestimate what events may be stressful. Cats are territorial creatures of habit who take great comfort in familiarity. For some, just the slightest insult to their comfort zones can open the door to stress.

The most obvious warning sign is...
any change in your cat’s normal behavior. For example, your normally well-groomed cat starts to neglect herself or she begins over-grooming. Psychogenic Alopecia is a condition where the cat excessively grooms herself due to behavioral reasons, to the point of creating bald patches (see related article on page 16 of this issue).

Other signs include changes in appetite, litter box habits or disposition. Ongoing stress can also lead to medical problems (as with humans), so it’s not to be taken lightly.

Helping a Stressed Kitty
Your veterinarian is the first person to call when you suspect your cat may be stressed. Because the symptoms can be so general, other potential medical conditions need to be ruled out first.

Once the cat has been cleared of any medical concerns, it’s time to look at the environment from her point of view to uncover any potential stress triggers. Don’t overlook seemingly insignificant things such as the neighbor’s barking dog or the fact that your teenager’s friends are loud and disruptive every time they visit. What makes stress so destructive is its cumulative effect.

Think of how stress impacts your own life. You may be able to handle short-term stress, but how well do you cope when it becomes a day-to-day, never-ending cycle? Doesn’t it get to you? Well, it also gets to your kitty.

Reinventing Playtime
The next step in helping your cat is to take her mind off her worries. It may sound silly, but shifting her focus does help. Do this by diverting her attention toward the positive. Reacquaint your cat with playtime. If she’s really stressed out, I’ll bet she gave up on her toys a long time ago.

Engage in daily interactive play sessions. Use a fishing-pole type toy to bring out the predator in your cat. It may take time, but reawakening that side of her can create confidence. Interactive playtime will provide her with a more positive association toward her current surroundings.

Use the correct play method: Move the toy like prey in order to entice your cat. Don’t dangle the toy in her face. Let her feel as if she has control and can advance at her own pace. Use the interactive toy on a regular basis to distract your cat and diffuse tense situations. In multicat households, distraction through playtime can avoid stressful stand-offs.

Keep your cat occupied when you’re not home through the use of activity toys. Toys such as Play-N-Treat (Virtu Co., 800-565-2695) give your cat a task to perform with a reward at the end. Play-N-Treat is a hollow ball that you fill with dry food or treats. As the cat rolls the ball, a treat falls out of the hole.

Environmental Adjustments
Positive environmental changes may need to be made as well. Make sure the litter box is in a safe place and doesn’t cause additional stress. Too many cats sharing too few boxes can be stressful. Is the food bowl too close to the litter box? Do your cats fight at the food bowls? Does the family dog constantly follow the cat around? How do the children handle the cat? Did you recently add another pet to the home? Do you only have one scratching post for several cats? All of these things can be stressful, but are easily remedied.

Your cat needs to feel secure in her environment, so set up areas that are exclusively hers. She needs a safe place to nap where children can’t reach her—such as a cat tree. In multicat homes, there should be enough perches and safe areas for each cat. Fighting over the one window perch will only create stress.

Bach Remedies
In addition to behavior modification and environmental adjustments, there are other things that can help a stressed-out kitty. Whenever I encounter a cat in a stress crisis during my housecalls, I rely on the Bach Flower Remedies. If you aren’t familiar with the remedies, I urge you to read one of the many books written about them.

These flower essences, discovered by Dr. Edward Bach in the 1930s, have a remarkable effect on the emotional state of humans and animals.
Unlike herbs, which can have contraindications, the Bach Flower Remedies are safe to use in conjunction with any food or drug. Remedies such as Mimulus, Larch or Crab Apple are often very helpful. Read about all 38 remedies in order to find the one(s) right for your individual cat.

In total crisis, I start with the Rescue Remedy for two weeks. The Rescue Remedy as well as many of the other individual remedies are available at natural food stores.

To make up a treatment bottle, you'll need a one-ounce glass dropper bottle. Add two drops of each selected remedy. You can create a treatment bottle of several remedies, but I don't recommend using more than three or four at one time. If the few that you've chosen aren't helping, you can later create a new treatment bottle.

After adding each selected remedy, fill the bottle three-quarters full of spring water. Don't use distilled or tap water. Recap the bottle, and shake at least 100 times. Kept in the refrigerator, the treatment bottle will stay fresh for two weeks. Brandy or vinegar may be added as a preservative to make the remedy last longer, but I find that many cats object to the taste. After two weeks, simply discard whatever remains. The dosage is four drops on the tongue, four times a day, until you see a change in behavior. If it's easier, you can add the drops to a little food, such as a half-teaspoon of yogurt, instead of directly administering them on the tongue.

**Proper Nutrition**
Nutrition plays an important role in combating stress. If your cat isn't eating a well-balanced, wholesome diet, right now is the time to speak to your holistic veterinarian about making the changeover. To avoid adding to your cat's stress, however, any dietary adjustments must be gradual. No sudden changes or you'll send her stress meter through the roof.

When stressed, the body uses up Vitamins C and B. Speak to your veterinarian about whether supplementation is needed. Don't take it upon yourself to supplement without the advice of your vet.

A wonderful environmental adjustment for your home is to use an air purifier. Ones that release negative ions are very helpful. Negative ions make us feel better; they're naturally abundant in water sprays, at the beach, in sunshine. Pollution and cigarette smoke are among the things that destroy negative ions. Using an ionizer will help restore balance. Limit the amount of positive ions in your home by not exposing your cat to cigarette smoke.

Since sunshine is such a mood elevator, provide your cat with access to a sunny window. And, on the flip side, cats in stress must have hiding places as well, so create little cozy hideaways. Prop open a closet door, use a soft-sided cat tunnel or even keep open paper bags around. If you can create these hideaways in elevated places, all the better.

**Everyone Benefits!**
Becoming more aware of the potential stress to your cat helps everyone in the family. Many of my clients discovered the cause of their cats' stress was also the cause of their own. Ionizers, Bach Flower Remedies, improved nutrition, more playtime and a friendlier environment benefit everyone—feline, canine and human.