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Feline Body Language Signals

Stress

All cats experience stress at certain levels of intensity. Some cats recover quickly from a stressful situation while other cats have a more difficult time. There are hundreds of reasons why a cat may become stressed and feel anxious. A cat can become stressed and anxious for the same reasons people do.

When a cat is feeling stressed and becoming anxious they exhibit body language cues that will convey this message. Sometimes the message may be difficult to interpret since most of the cat's body language is not intentional but rather a reflexive response to a specific perceived stimulus. Cats have an innate fight or flight response to fearful situations and would prefer to flee and hide from a perceived threat. They would rather avoid confrontation but if feeling trapped and threatened, they will fight.

When a cat is becoming stressed and is feeling anxious they may exhibit several cues in trying to cope with their emotions called internal calming signals. In an attempt to cope with a situation a cat may exhibit several different calming signals that may include:

- ✓ Yawning
- ✓ Lip licking
- ✓ Freezing
- ✓ Blinking
- ✓ Grooming
- ✓ Avoidance or looking away
- ✓ Hiding
- ✓ Vocalization
- ✓ Dilated pupils
- ✓ Facial whisker twitching
- ✓ Tail tucking or piloerection
- ✓ Out of context play behavior

When a cat exhibits an out of context or irrelevant response to stress and anxiety it is called a *displacement behavior*. You will usually see this during a social conflict; for example, a harassed cat may be undecided whether to run from its attacker or stand and fight. Instead the cat displays a third, unrelated behavior such as grooming. Grooming is a normal activity that cats find calming and reassuring.

If the displacement behavior becomes repetitive and serves no useful purpose, the cat may develop a compulsive disorder. In some cases a compulsive disorder can be self destructive as in a disorder called *psychogenic alopecia*. This disorder is an over grooming or hair plucking that can target the lower abdominal region, the back of the legs, the lower back, and the feet, shoulders, and front legs. Should an owner observe their cat exhibiting repetitive behavior they need to first contact their veterinarian and make an appointment to have their cat examined to rule out any medical condition. Second, the owner needs to observe the situation at the precise time the behavior occurs in an attempt to determine the stimuli that is causing the stress. Third, the owner needs to minimize the stress.

To actively reduce a cat's stress and anxiety consider the following:



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- ✓ Call your veterinarian and schedule an appointment for a physical examination. It is crucial that you rule out any medical conditions. Cats do not always act sick even when they are. Any change in their behavior could mean that your cat is ill and you should seek veterinary medical attention.

- ✓ **Never use punishment**, physical or verbal, such as yelling at the kitten/cat and then swatting at her to correct a behavior. This will only reinforce fear in your kitten/cat and teach her to mistrust your actions. It may also encourage your kitten/cat to become aggressive.
- ✓ Provide a safe place for her to hide. Observe where she likes to hide and feels safe. Provide easy access to that space or create a similar one for her to retreat to when needed. Make sure she has access to food, water and a litterbox at all times.
- ✓ Be sure she has an escape route to her safe place. An escape route only works if the cat knows how to use it. Do not pick a route you have never seen your cat take.
- ✓ Pay attention to your kitten/cat's body language. If she is threatening you, leave her alone. Give her space and time to work through her anxiety. She will come out when she feels it is safe. If needed use a food or treats to encourage her to come out of hiding. Go slow and do not force the issue.
- ✓ Avoid direct eye contact. This will make your stressed kitten/cat more anxious and defensive. They will interpret this as a threatening behavior.
- ✓ If she is afraid of a particular person or animal, do not allow that person or animal to approach her. Completely ignore her and do not force the issue. If your cat does take the initiative to approach the person have them offer her a food treat but do not pet her. Continue to ignore her after giving the treat.
- ✓ Avoid comforting/soothing the cat when she is acting fearful. Instead, reward confident behavior. Most of all your cat needs patience and time to deal with the stimulus that frightens her.
- ✓ Increase play therapy and mental stimulation when your cat is not acting fearful. This will help decrease anxiety and may help strengthen your relationship. Pair the play activity with tasty food rewards to help build confidence.
- ✓ *Feliway* spray or a *Feliway* diffuser may help a nervous or fearful cat to relax. This product can be purchased through your veterinarian, a pet store (including online stores), or the SPCA.
- ✓ Take a "hands off", calm approach to helping your fearful cat to improve your relationship. Do not force the issue or set your cat up to fail. Patience, time and lots of love are the keys to success. Try and remember how it feels to be scared. You must be kind and understanding of what your cat is feeling.
- ✓ Check with your veterinarian about short-term drug therapy or other safe alternatives. Drug therapy must always be paired with behavior modification techniques to be effective.
- ✓ If your cat exhibits fear aggression, contact A Purrfect Paw at 716-465-6555 for assistance in creating a behavior modification program for your cat.

More ideas for thought:

- ✓ Leave a radio on playing soft soothing music.



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- ✓ Use a non-confrontational approach by allowing your cat to sniff your fingers and then slowly begin to stroke the cheek. Go in the direction away from the face.
- ✓ Never reach for or over the cat's head.
- ✓ Use calm and deliberate petting.
- ✓ Use a calm, soothing voice. Do not yell or scream around your cat.

"I Have More Questions..."

- ✓ If you have additional questions about this subject, please contact Purrfect Paws Animal Behavior Center, LLC at 465-6555 or behavior@purrfectpawsabc.com.



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