



Decoding Your Cat's Behavior

by Jane Brunt, DVM

One of the main goals all cat owners want to reach is an understanding of feline behavior and ensuring a safe, happy household...for their cats and themselves alike.

Cats often end up in shelters because their owners don't understand that what the cats are doing is instinctual and is behavior that can either be channeled or changed. As pet-care specialists, professional pet sitters want to help cat owners understand that they can work through most behavioral difficulties they may encounter and that sometimes undesirable behaviors can be happening because their cat is sick.

Here are some basic challenges you may face with your feline companion and some tips on how to deal with them.

1. Litter box troubles. Ensuring you have the proper number of litter boxes is the first step in avoiding accidents. There should be one more litter box than the number of cats, so if you have two cats, there should be three litter boxes. The litter boxes should also be in a private place where the cat can feel safe and comfortable. Also, if your cat doesn't seem to be using the box regular-

ly, try different litters until you find one that your cat likes. If your cat is generally really good about using the litter box and then suddenly stops, your cat needs to see the veterinarian because it could be sick.

2. Scratching. Cats scratch as a way to leave their scent; they have glands in their paws and when they scratch they are marking their territory. To dissuade your cat from marking your sofa as its territory, ensure you have something better and more enjoyable for it to scratch instead. There are many types of scratching posts available. Some cats prefer horizontal surfaces while others prefer vertical surfaces. Some prefer rope scratching posts while others prefer cardboard. Try different varieties until you find one your cat likes and reward your cat for using the post.

3. Boredom-related problems. Many times cats will get into things they aren't supposed to because they are curious, active, intelligent creatures. Try to ensure your cats have plenty of positive things to do while you're away so that they aren't tempted to play with the toilet paper roll or bat around your curios. Studies have shown that a happy cat is a healthy cat, so ensure your cat has an en-

riched environment full of fun things to play with, perches to look out at the world from and activities to keep its mind engaged and working.

4. Other issues. These can often be solved with the help of your veterinarian and/or a veterinary behaviorist. In addition to your veterinarian, shelters often work with local behaviorists, and will be able to direct you to one in your area. However, sudden changes in temperament or behavior could be the result of an illness, and if your cat suddenly starts acting differently you should see your veterinarian as soon as possible.

Remember that when you adopt a new cat, it can take them some time to acclimate to your home, and the stress of moving can be difficult. Give your new feline friend a little time and space to get used to you and you will be rewarded with a wonderful, loving new companion.

Dr. Jane Brunt is executive director of the CATALYST Council, a national initiative comprised of animal health and welfare organizations working on behalf of cats. psw