

Stress in Cats: Signs, Sources & Coping

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We humans feel the heart thumping, nauseating effects of stress from work overload, arguments with loved ones, moving, and other difficult life events. Many owners think their indoor cats can't possibly experience stress because their lives are too easy. However, cats can and do experience stress; their triggers are just different.

The term stress describes the mental and physiological changes that occur when your cat faces a threat. When your cat perceives immediate danger, she may enter a "fight or flight" mode. This flood of autonomic nervous system activity results in many physical changes. Your cat's pupils dilate to better scan her environment. Heart rate and blood flow increase, providing energy to flee. Her fur and tail may puff out, so she looks bigger and more threatening. These responses help her deal with the threat.

Sometimes, however, your cat cannot discern the source of the threat (such as the booming sounds from an outdoor construction crew) or may not be able to avoid a recurring source of fear (such as a hostile family member or pet). Her body stays in a prolonged state of stress, causing anxiety. Chronic anxiety can lead to serious health problems.

Signs of Chronic Stress

Cats show chronic stress in many ways: changes in grooming, decreased social interaction (more frequent hiding), excessive vocalization, decreased exploration or play, less sleep (she's too busy staying attuned to threatening surroundings), withdrawal, changes in appetite, inappropriate elimination. Since many of these behaviors can also indicate illness, it's important to take your cat to the veterinarian to rule out possible health problems.

Sources of Feline Stress

Environmental: A strange animal lurking in the yard, scary noises (such as construction work or a hostile owner yelling), new baby or new pet, strong scents (air freshener, colognes or a dirty litter box), blaring music or television, or a house full of company.

Physical: Illness, obesity, physical trauma, punishment by owner, fleas and other parasites, unpredictable feeding schedule (cat goes hungry for extended periods), or surgical procedures.

Emotional: Neglect, death, or a prolonged absence of human or animal companion in the home, lack of mental stimulation (such as challenging play), or lack of choices or control over a situation (such as only one feeding/litter station in a multi-cat household).

Coping

Your cat requires places to hide from perceived threats or bully cats in your home. [Climbing shelves](#) and [cat trees](#) work great. Offer therapeutic outlets, like a [scratching post](#), [heated bed](#), [Hiding Hut](#), or sunny [window perch](#). However, if a strange cat lurks outdoors, you may need to close the shades temporarily. Make sure each cat, in multi-cat homes, has her own [feeding](#) and [litter station](#) and keep them very clean. If you have a kitten, expose her to many different situations, people, and pets to help her handle stress better as an adult. Try a pheromone or herbal therapy, such as [Comfort Zone® with Feliway® Spray](#) or [Rescue Remedy](#). Interact with your cat often; give her daily attention, [interactive play](#), and petting. When you stroke her, her purring also helps relieve stress.

Comfort Zone® with
Feliway® Spray

Window Cat
Perch

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Hiding Hut

Super Deluxe
Cat Tree