



Does Your Cat Have Separation Anxiety?

Dr. Lindell explains the signs of cats that become distressed when left home alone.

So many people think of cats as being aloof and independent. We have all heard phrases such as “dogs come when called, cats take a message and get back to you,” a saying popular enough to have earned T-shirt status.

But what about the cat that does come when called? You know, the cat that’s always ready to abide by her owner’s requests. Such a cat might follow her special person all around the house, keeping visual if not physical contact whenever possible. This cat might not be so very independent after all.

What a boost to the morale, to discover that a cat might want — and even need — her person for things beyond mere sustenance. A loving greeting feels special. And as a person walks through her otherwise empty house talking to “herself,” how wonderful to have an attentive and agreeable audience.

Yet there may be less than pleasant consequences for the less than independent cat. Most cats must spend some time at home alone. Some cats, perhaps those that are very attached to or dependent upon people, clearly consider this time alone to be stressful.

In fact, some cats are diagnosed with the condition commonly known as separation related anxiety. What exactly does separation related anxiety entail? The term is most commonly used to describe a condition in which one or more behavioral signs of anxiety are exhibited when a cat is unable to gain access to her person. Some cats exhibit these signs only when their people leave the house. Other cats become anxious when people are

home but unavailable, such as when people spend time behind closed doors. Occasionally, cats become attached to or dependent upon other household pets and exhibit signs of anxiety when these pets leave the house.

Before a diagnosis of separation-related anxiety is assigned, one should establish that the troublesome behavioral signs are exhibited during the majority of departures. That is, the behavior pattern is not intermittent or occasional. In most cases, the particular separation-related behavior is not exhibited when household people are present and available.

What to Look For


There are several behaviors that have been associated with separation-related anxiety in cats. One frequently reported behavior is urination, or occasionally defecation, outside the litter box. Of course, cats may eliminate outside their boxes for many reasons, including illness. Any cat that eliminates outside her litter box should be examined by her veterinarian. If there are no medical reasons for the behavior, then a behavioral assessment is in order. Conditions such as litter box aversion, location or surface preference, and marking behavior must be carefully considered. After these other behavioral causes have been ruled out and once it has been determined that the elimination occurs only during periods of social separation, a diagnosis of separation-related anxiety may be established.

A second behavior associated with separation-related anxiety is destructive behavior. Cats may use their claws or

teeth to damage household items. It is important to be sure that there are no medical causes for the behavior, particularly when items are chewed or ingested. Other behavioral diagnoses must be ruled out as well. Some destructive behavior, although socially unacceptable (and certainly amenable to modification), is completely normal. Cats that suffer from obsessive-compulsive behavior or attention-seeking behavior may also exhibit destructive behavior. Again, to confirm the diagnosis of separation related anxiety, be sure that the cat does not engage in destructive behavior when she is able to access family members.

Instead of chewing or scratching items, some cats express their anxiety by chewing or licking themselves. The medical evaluation for these cats will include careful inspection of the skin, including microscopic testing, to be sure that there is no underlying pathology. If a clean bill of health is given, then the behavioral diagnosis would be determined just as described for cats that destroy items.

Finally, some cats that suffer from separation-related anxiety vocalize excessively. Usually, a plaintive wail is heard by neighbors. A physical examination will eliminate other causes of vocalization such as pain. Other behavioral conditions that could trigger this type of vocalization include cognitive decline for the elderly cat, sexual behavior for an intact cat, and attention-seeking behavior. With these other conditions, one would expect the cat to vocalize even when family members were close by.

In addition to exhibiting stress-related behaviors in the absence of people, cats suffering from separation-related anxiety may exhibit signs of anxiety as family members prepare to leave the house. Some cats retreat to a hideaway. More disconcerting are the cats that lunge aggressively in an apparent attempt to prevent the departure from occurring at all. 

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