

Stress triggers for **cats**

Are you contributing to your cat's anxiety and behavior issues? It's possible if you do any of the following:

1. You punish your cat. Swatting and hitting your cat only teaches it to fear your approach. Telling your cat “no” only interrupts the behavior. Instead, show your cat what you want it to do, and reward it for appropriate behaviors. Cats are very curious and agile—so give yours places to go and things to do, and keep potentially dangerous items picked up and put away.

2. You assume your cat “knows” English. Animals communicate using body language and are very good at figuring us out. Most people don't bother teaching their cats to sit, much less any other cue—but it's surprisingly easy to train them to do behaviors on cue. Just don't assume your cat understands what you're saying without teaching it what you want it to do first.

3. You grab your cat's head to tousle its hair. Nobody likes to have their head grabbed and rubbed—cats are no different! Most cats prefer a few long strokes from head to tail; others prefer a small amount of gentle scratching around the chin or ears. Many cats get irritated by an extended period of repetitive stroking.

4. You hug or kiss your cat. Cats like to be able to move and escape situations. When we hold them tightly, they may become stressed, anticipating that something bad is going to happen.

5. You don't clean your cat's litter box. Nobody likes to use a dirty toilet—including your cat. Imagine not flushing your own toilet for three or four days! Ideally, the litter box should be scooped every time you notice waste. Otherwise, they should be scooped at least once daily. Most need to be completely emptied and cleaned

every one to two weeks.

Regular scooping also allows you to identify early signs of illness such as diarrhea, constipation, or excessive or lack of urination.

6. Your cat's litter box is in an inconvenient location. The spot you've chosen for the litter box might work best for you, but a cat that has to negotiate humans of all ages, other pets, stairs, or loud appliances might feel like the journey is a suicide mission every time it needs to eliminate.

7. You tempt your cat to play by wiggling your fingers or toes, then get angry when it bites or scratches you. Cats naturally grab “prey” using their teeth and claws. Offer your cat the appropriate chew toys so it knows that hands are for loving—not biting!

8. You leave your cat home alone with a jumbo-sized portion of food and one litter box while you go on vacation for a long weekend. Especially for cats that eat quickly, this can be stressful because they'll have no food left by the end of the weekend. Cats can become sick if they don't eat every day. Timed feeders can be helpful in this situation. A self-cleaning litter box may also be a reasonable option, but don't rely on it—it's important that you pay attention to the frequency and quality of your pet's eliminations so you can identify any changes that could indicate stress-induced health problems such as cystitis, constipation, and diarrhea.

9. You use strong-smelling cleansers, deodorizers, and products containing alcohol. Cats' noses are sensitive, and these scents can be offensive to them. Be careful about the use of these products in your home or on your person. Some cats may even find the smell of hair spray, perfume, or cologne unpleasant.

10. You add new cats to your home without an introduction period. When an unrelated cat appears and tries to join a related group, it's in the cats' nature to attack and force the outsider to leave. Without a proper period of controlled, gradual introduction, the chance of aggression between cats and stress increases.

Information provided by Valarie V. Tynes, DVM, DACVB, Premier Veterinary Behavior Consulting, Sweetwater, Texas, and Colleen Koch, DVM, Lincoln Land Animal Clinic, Jacksonville, Ill.

