



10 calming tips for anxious cats

By Ness Bird – Nutrition Adviser and RVN CertCFVHNut ©

1. Confirm anxiety

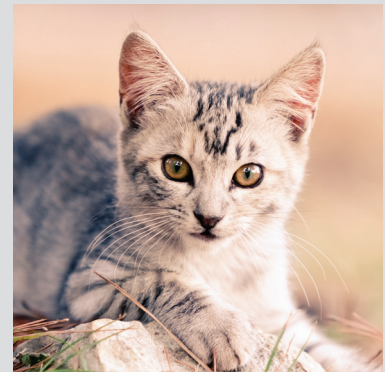
Although a trip to the vet can be stress inducing in itself, it is very important to rule out medical conditions because the symptoms of anxiety can be very similar to some of those displayed by a cat that is physically unwell or in pain. These may include vocalising more than usual, inappetence, hiding or showing reluctance to indulge in normal behaviours such as playing. Excessive grooming, pacing, obsessive sucking of fur or fabrics, and inappropriate urination indoors or spraying may all be signs of anxiety, but they can all be symptomatic of other conditions such as allergic skin disease (over-grooming), disorders of the nervous system (pacing), hyperthyroidism (sucking) and urinary tract disorders (inappropriate urination). Once your vet has diagnosed anxiety, referral to a behaviourist may be suggested. This can be very beneficial especially if you are not sure what is causing your cat's heightened stress.

2. Establish the cause

Look at all possible reasons why your cat may be feeling anxious. Keeping a diary can be helpful. Have there been any changes to his/her daily routine? Sometimes it can be easy to establish why a cat is stressed; e.g. the arrival of a new pet or a new baby. Other times it can be difficult because the stressful events may be happening out of sight; e.g. a new cat in the neighbourhood threatening an outdoor cat's territory. Sometimes a single event that frightens the cat whilst she/he is eating, urinating or defecating can leave him/her feeling very unsettled when she/he carries out these activities in the future. It is important that your cat feels safe when passing his/her waste because this is when he/she is at his/her most vulnerable. You may find that providing a litter box indoors for an outdoor cat, moving the litter tray to a more secluded location, or providing a covered litter tray can help. Feline stress cannot be ignored because it can increase the risk of urinary tract problems including cystitis and crystals.

3. Nutrition and behaviour

Diet can affect feline behaviour. Have you changed your cat's usual food lately? Cats digest and assimilate different diets to different degrees of efficiency, and sometimes a product with alternative ingredients or a different nutrient balance (the way in which the protein, fat and carbohydrate are proportioned) will alter the blood sugar, serotonin levels and rate at which energy is released. If your cat was previously behaving normally on his/her original food, try changing it back to see whether his/her behaviour reverts back to normal. Irregular food intake can also cause fluctuations to the blood sugar, so make sure your cat is





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not missing meals or other animals are not finishing his/her food off before he/she has eaten enough. Certain chemical colourants and preservatives are believed to contribute to learning difficulties and hyperactivity in children, and some sensitive cats might suffer from similar adverse responses, although this is largely based on anecdotal rather than scientific evidence.

4. Pheromone therapy

Pheromone therapy can be an effective way to help appease an anxious cat, although it must be emphasised that this does not negate the need to try to establish the root cause of the problem and eliminate or minimise where possible the stressful events. Pheromone sprays and diffusers work by mimicking natural feline facial pheromones, which make your cat feel calm and safe when he/she inhales them. Pheromone therapy is very safe, and undetectable to the human nose. If your cat has not been neutered, this is advisable since queens are in season for ten months of every year, which represents a lot of time for sexual frustration to develop.

5. Environmental enrichment

Some cats develop anxiety because their home is not sufficiently feline friendly. Inadequate space and a lack of areas to exercise, scratch, stretch and climb can cause stress. Make sure your cat's food and water bowls are easily accessible and positioned out of the way of any dogs if they share the household. Ensure also that your cat has plenty of stimulating, safe toys, and posts where she is allowed and encouraged to scratch and climb.

6. Separation anxiety

Although separation anxiety is more common in dogs, some cats can suffer too. Make sure you are spending adequate quality time with your cat. This means setting aside special time for grooming and playing games, but don't focus your attention on the cat all the time you are home as this can make her more dependent. It may help to leave your cat for short periods if possible, and before leaving the house or returning home, ignore him/her. Although cats sleep a lot of the time, environmental enrichment is critical. Some cats like to see outdoors, and some may feel more settled if a radio is left on low for some quiet background noise. Helping your cat to become less dependent or fixated on one person (if he/she has a favourite family member) may be beneficial, so if there is someone else who can be responsible for feeding and grooming duties sometimes, this can strengthen bonds between the cat and other members of the household and help increase her confidence with them.

7. Medication

Feline anxiety is serious because of the health risks it poses (urinary tract infections and crystals) and is also an unpleasant condition for both the cat and owner to have to deal with. In cases where a cat is suffering from prolonged periods of stress, or he/she is demonstrating problem behaviours such as aggression or inappropriate urination; prescription veterinary drugs can be very beneficial. Medication must only be used under your vet's guidance, and may not be suitable for cats with hepatic or renal dysfunction. Some drugs e.g. benzodiazepines are only suitable for short term use as they can affect the memory and cause lethargy. Benzodiazepines reduce the cat's fear response, and have an immediate calming effect. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) take longer to work (up to four months). These affect the cat's serotonin production and can be helpful for compulsive behaviours and aggression. Drugs should be used in conjunction with, not instead of behavioural therapy.



8. Natural remedies

The efficiency of natural remedies is debatable, and evidence is largely anecdotal. Some owners however have reported reasonable success using flower remedies such as Bach Rescue Remedy, chamomile and valerian. It is important that you ask your vet's professional opinion as to suitability because although no prescription is required, some may interact badly with conventional medicines and others may be contraindicated in the event of a concurrent medical condition. Flower remedies are short acting, and are most suited to periods of unavoidable stress such as travelling or a trip to the vet rather than cats suffering from long-term anxiety.

9. Minimise stress

Some cats are perfectly happy most of the time, but may not cope with certain stressful situations that happen irregularly. Examples may include firework phobia, fear of storms, travelling, or visiting the vet. It goes without saying that it's vital to keep your cat safely indoors when there are firework displays or stormy weather. Behavioural modification and/or medication are necessary if your cat becomes severely stressed. Mild stress can be dealt with by providing a safe place to hide. Desensitisation is effective for many dogs, but its success rate in cats is low. When travelling, try to minimise stress beforehand. Keep the travel box well out of sight and mind until it is time to load your cat, and avoid rushing and stressing yourself. Some cats settle well at a cattery, but others find this extremely stressful. This is a case where avoidance may be the better option, and a cat sitter who can live in, or at least visit your cat several times a day could be considered as an alternative.

10. Keep calm

Compulsive behaviours in cats can worsen if you are stressed. They are very sensitive creatures and soon pick up on how their humans are feeling. Try to ignore any unacceptable behaviour as much as you can, because attention in itself is a reward. If you can, try to pre-empt your cat's behaviour and nip it in the bud before it happens, this can really help as the familiarity of a set routine can reinforce certain behaviours. By doing something different such as instigating a new game or feeding him/her, rather than simply anticipating the behaviour can be beneficial. Punishing the cat will not work, and may make things worse because this increases the unpredictability of the environment and can result in heightened fear, which in turn can damage your cat's trust in you and cause or worsen aggression.

