

Adjust Your Cat's "Bad Behavior"

We ask a lot of our cats, and take the adjustments they make to live with us largely for granted -- unless there's a problem.

We ask our cats to relieve themselves in a small tray instead of anywhere in their territory, as would be natural for them. We ask them to scratch in one place instead of marking every surface, as they would in the wild. We ask them to ignore their ability to jump gracefully onto tables and countertops, and to adjust their naturally nocturnal schedule to our daytime ones.

Most cats make the compromises with relative ease. If yours hasn't, you can use tried-and-true strategies to help your cat adjust to the unnatural demands of living in a human-created environment.

The first step in resolving any behavioral problem is working with your veterinarian to make sure it's not a health problem. Illness must be corrected if you're to have any hope of changing the behaviors you abhor.

Cats are good at hiding illness, and we often add to the problem by attributing "bad behavior" to those signs they do give us. A cat with a urinary-tract problem, for example, may come to associate the pain he feels while in the litter box with the location itself, and start eliminating elsewhere.

Even healthy cats can become unhinged by stress and react by altering their behavior. Some cats mark territory by spraying when their home is "invaded" by a new pet or person. In a cat's mind, this behavior makes sense: Making the world smell like himself is comforting to him (though not to you).

Stressed-out cats can be helped with environmental adjustments, such as limiting his territory to a single room for a while. A calming medication from your veterinarian may help ease your cat -- and you -- through a rough time, if combined with those environmental changes.

If it's not illness or stress, you need to look at your own behavior. Are you asking something of your cat that's not possible for him to give? Your cat may not want to use the litter box if it's rarely cleaned, or is in a place with no privacy. Likewise, asking a cat to leave the couch alone is not fair if he has nothing else in the house to scratch. You need to provide him with some alternatives before you can work on getting him to leave the furniture alone.

Do you provide your cat with enough exercise and entertainment? You've asked your cat to give up his whole world, and all you're offering in return is a few hours of your presence a day and maybe a catnip mouse? More toys! More play!

You must also consider that maybe your cat never knew the house rules to begin with. If all you've ever done in the way of training is to scream or hit your cat, you've probably not taught him anything except that you're someone to avoid. Physical correction has no place in changing a cat's behavior; cats just don't understand it. And using such correction just stresses them out, leading to even more problems.

Keeping a journal of problems can help you spot and understand trends while removing some of the emotion involved in living with an animal who is causing you unhappiness. Realizing that your cat's behavior isn't spiteful or capricious can make the problem easier for you to live with while you work on turning the situation around.

The future is grim for a cat whose owner gives up on him. If you're reaching the breaking point -- ideally before that point -- ask your veterinarian about a referral to a behaviorist. A consultation with an expert can provide you with a plan for fixing the problem. It's much cheaper than replacing carpeting or a sofa, and certainly a better option than giving up on your cat.