



Play Therapy for Cats

Is your cat leaping out from nowhere to attack your ankles with teeth, claws, or both as you try to make it from the living room to the kitchen? Have your two cats who have always gotten along suddenly changed and can't be in the same room as each other? Are you being awakened at 4:00 am by your vocalizing cat? Is this the second time this week you've stepped in cat urine or found feces in the clean laundry?

Strange as it may seem, these unpleasant activities may have a common cause—and a common solution: regular, structured, interactive play, also known as “play therapy!”

How often has your doctor told you to exercise more, not only to keep your body in shape, but for the mental, stress-relieving benefits of physical exertion? Much of the stress in our modern lives arises from the feeling that we cannot control our environment. It has also been shown that animals, too, feel much more stress when they are helpless to change the conditions of their lives. How can we expect anything less from our cats? The *sources* of a cat's stress are far less under their control than our own, and their stress *outlets* are much more limited.

Stressors

- **Territorial Infringement:**

In a multi-cat home, through a hierarchical system we still don't fully understand, cats typically develop a system of “time sharing,” or rotating favored areas to increase their greater sense of space. Simply put, the more animals we squeeze into a space, the more psychological pressure (or stress) is placed on the cat.

- **Disruption In Routine:**

For a cat, things must happen in roughly the same way, at the same time, every day. Surprises are not welcome! Whether it is feeding time, comings and goings of human family members, furniture placement, the type and location of their food, or litter box cleaning habits—routine is key!

- **The Big Zero:**

That's right; *nothing* can be a huge stressor. A hunter without prey to stalk is like a kid without recess—bored, edgy, and looking for trouble!

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- **Other Miscellaneous Nuisances:**

Some other highly bothersome problems to our felines include: Remodeling or construction in the home, neighborhood cats that spray or look in through windows, or newborns and the strange, unfamiliar sounds they make and attention they demand.

Outlets

- **Internalized Stress:**

The symptoms of stress that are internalized may be more difficult to notice, but are extremely important signs that your cat is taking in more than s/he can handle. They may include:

1. **Displaced grooming**—as opposed to normal grooming, which can occupy your cat for up to three hours per day, this will look like stopping mid-stride and suddenly licking, almost purposefully.
2. **“Back Electricity”**—you will see this when you touch a cat and you see ripples of skin and muscle shoot down the length of its back.
3. **Tail Twitch/Wag**—this action is another attempt to release energy, anxiety, or a sign of impending aggression.
4. **Somaticizing**—a psychological term that implies converting emotional distress to bodily symptoms. This does encompass much of what has been discussed above, but relates stress to a wider spectrum of other obsessive-compulsive disorders, vomiting, appetite disorders, litterbox avoidance, and a number of chronic medical problems.

- **Externalized Stress:**

More outgoing, extroverted cats can (and probably will) act out their stress in one of the following ways:

1. **Play/Predatory Aggression**—to a cat, *play and prey are the same thing!* This is why your ankles get bitten when you’re walking down the hallway, or your feet get attacked while you’re sleeping. These actions are not spiteful, just misdirected. We’ll learn to appropriately guide these actions with play therapy.
2. **Redirected Aggression**—occurs when a cat is frightened or upset, but rather than go after the real cause, the cat instead turns on the closest target. Often the innocent victim is another cat or pet in the home, or the guardian. After an incident like this occurs, it can take a long time to normalize relations. Play therapy can be an integral part in giving the aggressor an acceptable outlet for frustration, and restoring the victim’s confidence.
3. **The Usual Suspects**—stress plays a part in many litterbox problems, scratching furniture, and middle-of-the-night vocalizing. The important idea to highlight here is that it plays a *part*. Stress *alone* usually is a contributor; not the cause for these problems to continue. There are many help topics within each issue to consider, but play therapy can help relieve some anxiety and stress for your cat.

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Time to Play

This first step toward establishing a difference in casually playing with your cat and “play therapy” is *routine*. Remember, your cat likes things to happen in a structured daily manner. The idea is to observe your cat’s natural energy patterns. Most likely, they will mirror that of the family’s. Dinner and bedtime tend to be popular; so by establishing play about a half hour before bed is a great idea. Once you’ve established a routine, it’s imperative to stick to it.

Toy selection is the next step to begin engaging your cat in therapeutic play. Basically, toys fall into two categories:

1. **Remote Toys**—this is any toy that can be thrown, played fetch with, and usually disappears under the couch or refrigerator not to be found until next year’s spring cleaning. Examples include: sparkle balls, crinkle balls, furry mice, and stuffed animals. These are great for other purposes, but not for what we’re trying to accomplish.
2. **Interactive Toys**—anything connected to you that will keep your cat’s interest for exponentially longer periods of time than remote toys. Examples include: Cat Dancers, Cat Charmers, or anything you put together at home using a stick, string, and toy on the end. One of the best interactive toys on the market for cats is called “Da Bird.” It’s a fishing pole toy with a unique feather configuration that, when swung through the air, makes the same flutter sound as flapping wings. When trying to tap into a cat’s play/prey drive, you can’t get any better than that!

Be the Bird!

While encouraging hunting behavior or playing the role of a dying bird may be disturbing or distasteful to many, it is important to view this as just a game. A game that is very important to your cat’s instincts, and a natural part of their behavior.

Now it’s time for some role-playing on your part. It’s not enough to dangle the toy while watching TV. That won’t generate the desired playtime rapture from your feline companion. You have to *be the bird!* When you wave the toy through the air, imagine what’s going on in your cat’s mind. Cats have patient hunting capabilities, so allow your cat to follow the pattern of flight around the room long enough to become completely involved in it. You can also talk to your cat in a light praising tone, asking “What is that?” or encouraging the cat to go after the toy to arouse their curiosity.

This next step is very important. It’s time to make the mistake that all bird victims eventually make to our expert hunters, and that is swooping too low, just low enough for the cat to make a grab. It’s then crucial to “play dead,” yet not let the slack completely go in the string that connects the toy to the wand. Don’t be fooled by wily feline hunting techniques; at this point your cat may act disinterested or walk away as they test the “deadness” of their prey. Wait a few seconds and start to slowly wriggle the feathers. That should get your cat’s attention, and if your cat doesn’t pounce in time, then off you go again, flying around the room.

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Sometimes the cat will pick the prey up in his/her mouth and start to walk away. Allow this and follow; it's not usually far and you should always be on the lookout for your next chance to "escape." Remember in your role as the bird, every time the cat lays a paw on you, it does injure you, so each "capture" should affect how fast you get away. As you, the bird, become less able to fly, seek refuge more on the ground, like behind the couch or around the corner.

This whole routine can be repeated, of course, until the cat is finished.

Play therapy can be highly successful in multi-cat households. Depending on personalities involved, cats can be worked individually or in groups. During "group therapy," be sure to include all cats, even those that may appear to want to watch rather than participate. Every once in a while, allow bystanders to take a swat by swinging the toy in their direction.

The Coup d'Gras

The final step in a successful play therapy session is eating! Not full meals, but a high protein, yummy, wet food snack will complete the natural cycle of hunt-kill-eat. It's important, once the session is over, that you stow the special play therapy toy somewhere your cat can't have access to it. Eventually, you'll start see a conditioned response to the toy coming out. In other words, your cat will see the fishing pole coming out of the closet and make the immediate association between it and the venting of energy, the constant praise and connective time with you, and the tasty treat that follows.

Of course, there are many variables in play routines. Cats are individuals and depending on their experience, they will approach this encounter in different ways. The general idea remains—to engage your cat through play therapy, not only to exercise their bodies, but to also stimulate their minds with their natural play/prey instinct.

Some Final Thoughts

- **Remember the Power of Praise**

Just as connecting on a physical level via the fishing pole increases the cat's attention span in the game, so does your constant praising. It's a common misconception that cats don't seek at least some approval from us.

- **Make Time in Your Busy Life**

We all have jobs, school, families, and stresses of our own without trying to make time to schedule play sessions with our cats. However, the benefits are immediate and innumerable to both cat and human. Not only will stress be lowered in both species by making space in the day for play, but by sticking with the program and allowing necessary time for change, you and your cat will be on the way to a new behavioral routine.

Last and certainly not least, the bond between you and your pet will be deepened in a new way, and that's something worth the effort!