

What to Know About Mental Health Care and Cats

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Like people, cats can suffer from mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. Find out how you can tell if your cat is struggling emotionally and what you can do about it.

Can Cats Get Depressed?

Of course, we can't know for sure what goes on in our cat's minds, but they can certainly show signs of deep sadness and depression. Cat depression can be hard to identify, especially if your cat is the loner type who likes to hide.



COMMON CUES YOUR CAT MAY BE DEPRESSED

- Lack of appetite, which can lead to weight loss
- Sleeping at times they'd normally be awake
- Not seeking out physical contact, for instance, they may stop brushing your legs, head bumping or jumping in your lap for a cuddle
- Decreased grooming, which can cause a dull and matted coat
- Loss of interest in playing or activity

If you notice these signs, you should visit your veterinarian. These same symptoms can indicate a health condition, which needs treatment. Your veterinarian can also advise you on how best to deal with your cat's depression.

Causes of Cat Depression

Depression in cats is often a temporary response to a change in their life. Some cats are quite sensitive, and they can experience mild depression over what seems to us like small things, such as moving their litter box or outfitting them with a new collar.



MAJOR CHANGES THAT CAN TRIGGER DEPRESSION

- Moving to a new home or apartment
- Arrival of a baby or adopted child
- A new pet in the household
- Construction in the home
- Visitors staying at the house
- Disruption in the family, like divorce or death
- A traumatic event, like getting hit by a car



In some cases, such as a short-term visitor or home improvements, you may be able to wait out whatever is stressing out your cat. If the change is permanent, they may go back to their happier selves after some time to adjust.

How to Help a Depressed Cat

First, you should visit your veterinarian to rule out any underlying illnesses. They can also help determine the best approach to helping your cat, which could include anti-anxiety medication.



OTHER WAYS TO HELP A DEPRESSED CAT

- **Stick to a routine.** Cats are not fans of uncertainty, so having steady times for meals, cuddles and playtime can help them feel more comfortable and relaxed.
- **Play with them.** A depressed cat may not be inclined to play, but it's worth trying to engage them with a favorite toy or activity.
- **Shower them with love.** If your cat isn't seeking you out for attention, go find them. Approach them gently and see if they'll accept a good scratching behind the ears.

- **Enhance their meals.** If your cat isn't eating enough, ask your veterinarian for advice on enticing them with added chicken broth or tuna water. These options also add liquid to your cat's diet, which can help prevent dehydration.
- **Turn on the tunes.** Your cat may enjoy the calming sound of classical music, especially if their depression is coupled with anxiety. Or perhaps something livelier would spark some energy and encourage them to play.

While you may be able to cheer your cat up, you may not be able to shake them out of their depression completely. They may still need time to process a life change or recover from the event that triggered their sadness. Don't hesitate to reach out to your veterinarian with any concerns.

Can Cats Die From Depression?

You may hear people talk about cats who died from a broken heart after a traumatic loss, like the death of their caretaker or a feline companion.

Depression itself isn't fatal, but it can cause your cat's health to deteriorate to a dangerous point. For instance, cats who refuse to eat or drink may lose an unhealthy amount of weight or become dehydrated. These issues can usually be prevented by early intervention with the help of your veterinarian.

Are There Cat Therapists?

There are people who advertise themselves as cat therapists or psychologists. These folks may be well-meaning, but their titles don't indicate that they have the skills or training necessary to help your cat.

Always consult your veterinarian first who can refer you to an expert such as a veterinarian with advanced training, certified as a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists.

Anxiety in Cats

Similar to depression, cats may experience anxiety after a change in their environment or lifestyle. Traumatic accidents, scrapes with other animals or frightening experiences can also trigger anxiety in cats.



SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY IN CATS

- Loss of appetite
- Lack of energy and interest in playing
- Pacing or restlessness
- Going outside the litterbox
- Overgrooming, which can lead to bald patches and painful skin issues
- Changes in behaviors, such as irritability or clinginess especially if your cat is typically independent
- Excessive meowing or yowling

If your cat is experiencing these symptoms, you should visit your veterinarian to check for an underlying health condition and get guidance on managing their anxiety.

Compulsive Behaviors

Cats with depression or anxiety may develop compulsive behaviors. They can also be caused by boredom, fear, frustration or other negative emotions.



COMMON COMPULSIVE CAT BEHAVIORS

- Repetitive vocalization without any apparent reason
- Constantly sucking on objects, such as toys or blankets
- Chewing on their own paws, tail or other body parts
- Pacing back and forth or in circles
- Chasing their tails
- Grooming excessively
- Swatting at or pouncing on imaginary prey

Compulsive behaviors may develop as a coping mechanism, which can offer your cat some short-term relief from their anxiety. If the behavior is not hurting them or disrupting your household, you may not need to intervene. Otherwise, you should bring your cat to the veterinarian.

Caring for Cats With Compulsive Behaviors

Your veterinarian can help you figure out the right approach to treating your cat's compulsive behavior and whether or not anti-anxiety medication would be useful.





OTHER THINGS YOU CAN TRY AT HOME

- **Distract them safely.** Try redirecting your cat from the undesirable behavior by engaging them in a more positive one, like playing a game, being groomed or enjoying a small treat.
- **Reduce your cat's stress.** If you know what is triggering your cat, you may be able to help them by making a specific change in their environment or lifestyle. You can also try to minimize their daily stress, for instance, by maintaining a set routine, providing them with a quiet place to rest and making sure they get enough exercise.
- **Avoid rewarding the behavior.** Your cat may look adorable chasing their tail but don't encourage them by paying attention. You should also avoid offering them a treat or a toy, which can be misinterpreted as a reward.
- **Don't punish them.** Compulsive behaviors, like constant meowing, can be frustrating, but you shouldn't scold or punish your cat. Negative reinforcements can make anxious or depressed feelings worse.

- **Be patient.** Remember that your cat is dealing with a mental health issue. They need your love and compassion.

If your cat has a mental health issue, pet insurance can help you manage the costs of treatment, including medication

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Wendy is the founder of Peak Veterinary Consulting and has practiced for 35+ years as an associate, practice owner and relief veterinarian. She's been a pet health insurance executive and a technical services veterinarian. Passionate about education and innovation, Dr. Hauser speaks, writes and consults with start-ups, industry partners—including Independence Pet Group[®]—and veterinary practices.