

Can Cats Feel Emotion?

Many cat enthusiasts have long believed that their pets feel emotions. Six behaviorists share their opinions.

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Based on feline physiology, it's probably realistic to assume cats feel emotions, John C. Wright, Ph.D., said. Cats are mammals, they have brain structures, and the way their brain works is similar to the way the human brain works, he continued.

Wayne Hunthausen, DVM, believes cats feel emotions. Although there is no way to tell for sure without talking to the cat, he says that in certain situations, their behaviors might be similar to how we would behave in that situation.

Cat therapist Carole Wilbourn said cats definitely have emotions. "They can express different moods happiness, sadness, rage that let me know. A cat acts the way it feels."

Cats feel every emotion humans feel, animal behaviorist Warren Eckstein said. "They may not react the same way, but they definitely feel the same emotions we feel."

On a less definitive note, Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D., said cats probably experience emotions, but we can only infer from their behavior.

Cats feel emotions "but not necessarily in the same way we think of them," Debra Horowitz, DVM, DACVB, said. "There are emotional aspects to their behavior."

"A lot of problems arise," Eckstein said, "when owners don't realize the cat has a range of emotions and don't know how to react to the cat when it might be feeling anxious or depressed." These are emotions that he feels are common in cats. "When you take a cat into a home, you have to treat it like part of the family."

One of the hardest things for cat owners to understand is their pets' behavior. Wilbourn said certain behaviors express a cat's happiness, such as purring and relaxing their bodies. Dr. Hunthausen said fear is expressed through opposite actions, such as withdrawal and avoidance.

Cat owners are prone to ascribing human emotion to their cat's behavior. Dr. Hetts urges owners to use caution when doing this, because the interpretation of the animal's behavior may lead to punishing animals because they are convinced the animal acted out of spite, which is most likely not the case. Wilbourn noted that a cat isn't a person, but people and cats share emotions.

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