

Kitty, Please Use the Litterbox!

Litterbox problems are among the most frustrating for cat owners. Learn how to solve current soiling situations and prevent future ones.

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Anxiety and PunishmentCats that soil in the house are frequently living with a great deal of stress and anxiety. Cats have a natural "fight or flight" response to stressful events. This survival mechanism goes awry when cats in human environments can't avoid constant stressors. Exposure to this unremitting anxiety alters the cat's physiology and makes it more susceptible to diseases, such as FIC.

"We may not realize how sensitive a cat is to something as simple as moving furniture around the house or having company over for dinner," said Tony Buffington DVM, a veterinarian and specialist in feline urinary disorders at the Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine in Columbus, Ohio. "Cats are creatures of habit and they depend on us to keep their surroundings stable and safe."

Another category of house-soiling is directly related to anxiety. This is seen when large changes come into a cat's life, something is causing significant distress, or the cat is suffering from separation anxiety syndrome. Experts once believed that cats were solitary and didn't have a need for social bonding, but this view of cats is incorrect.

Whatever the reason for eliminating outside the litterbox, one approach that does not help is punishment. Punishment increases the cat's anxiety and makes it feel all the more insecure. Punishment also makes the owner feel terrible and harms the trust implicit in the human-animal bond.

"Punishment never gets you anywhere," Pryor said. "It doesn't make the problem better and, in some situations, can make it worse. This is a tough concept to get across because we want to do something it's human nature. But I tell people, even if the cat is spraying right in front of them, or peeing on their briefcase, anything that adds anxiety or emotionality to the situation can make it worse."

The Sweet Smell of Success Buddy was a 13-year-old neutered Birman. "For 12 years, he was a wonderfully behaved animal," said his owner Carol Darr, of Santa Fe, N.M. But then two important changes came in Darr's life. She adopted, Zelda, a boisterous and outgoing alley cat. Then Darr started spending 12 to 14 hours a day away from home, caring for her ill mother. Buddy started defecating and urinating on the wool runner by the front door. This went on for months. "I tried disciplining him to no avail," Darr said. "I'd get so upset, I'd scream at him, and then I hated myself for doing it. I asked friends and my veterinarian for advice ... and went on the Internet looking for solutions. I had gotten to the point where I considered getting rid of him. Yet I kept stalling."