

Does My Cat Have Separation Anxiety?

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger discusses ways to ease cat anxiety and boredom

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: I adopted my 8-year-old cat, Kelly, about seven years ago from a shelter in Phoenix. Kelly's an only child right now; previously she had a rabbit and another cat as roommates. Due to my roommates moving out, she is now alone.

Lately she has become more vocal in her daily activities. She has always howled at the wall or pictures on the wall. She appears to be annoyed that I am gone at times for long periods of the day. I try to stop by after work and before going to class, but sometimes that is not feasible for me to do.

She always gets love and scratches the minute I get home. But I still get the attitude and vocalized complaints when I get there! It starts from the minute I put the key into the lock! I can hear her on the other side meowing.

I was wondering if she is bored and lonely and if getting another "friend" for her would be the answer, or if she is just complaining because she can?

A: Kelly may be exhibiting separation anxiety or she may be bored. But before determining that this is a behavior issue, I recommend that you take Kelly to your vet for a check-up. There are some diseases and medical conditions that can cause cats to loudly vocalize and to howl.

If she does have a behavior problem, there are a variety of activities you can do to help her become a well-adjusted, happy cat. Finding her a new buddy is one possibility. Enhancing her environment by providing her with lots of interactive toys and places to climb and hide in will help as well. She will appreciate tall cat trees that are placed next to windows so she can check out the neighborhood. Toys such as TurboScratchers and puzzle boxes will also keep her occupied.

When leaving in the morning, put the pajamas you slept in the night before in the areas Kelly usually naps in. Your smell will help reassure her that you haven't abandoned her. You can also help ease her separation anxiety with a treat ball into which you record your voice. Every time Kelly rolls it in order to access a treat, she will hear you telling her what a wonderful, perfect cat she is.

Keeping a consistent schedule with her will also help. If possible, have times set aside every day when you do things with her that she enjoys such as playing, grooming and feeding her delicious, healthy food. She will look forward to these special times with you.

If you do decide to introduce a new friend to Kelly, choose a buddy who has the same energy level as she does and who enjoys the company of other cats. The introductions need to be done very slowly. Keep them separated while you gradually introduce them to each other through scent exchanges and other enjoyable activities.