

SPRAY WARS

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My husband and I are confirmed believers in keeping cats indoors where they can safely lead long and happy lives. Several years ago, however, our 2-year-old neutered male orange tabby, Tinsel, started spraying in the house. We tried treating him with drugs that made him groggy, but the day that he backed up to Paul with a quivering tail, and doused his pants leg with copious amounts of evil-smelling cat spray was the last straw. Tinsel was banned to the outdoors during daytime hours, exposed to the hazards of the great unknown, and spent his nights in the relative security of our outdoor cattery on the back deck.

It broke my heart to put him outside. I worked at an animal shelter at the time, and was all too familiar with the risks that cats face when they are out on their own in the real world. I was also well aware of how difficult it was to stop a cat's spraying behavior, and how frequently spraying cats ended up at the animal shelter, surrendered by owners who could no longer tolerate the offensive odor of cat spray on their personal possessions and in their homes. Spraying cats were almost inevitably euthanized. The odor of cat spray is strong, foul, and difficult to completely eradicate once applied. If the family who loved their cat gave him up because they couldn't tolerate his behavior and the resulting stench, how could we expect to successfully place a spraying cat in a new home with someone who wasn't even emotionally attached to him yet?

Why Do They Do It?

Cats spray primarily to mark their territories. The most common offender is the unaltered adult male, but females, and neutered males like Tinsel, can also spray. While dominant cats may be more likely to engage in proactive status spraying than are less assertive ones, lower-ranking cats may be inclined to spray after an encounter to re-establish their claim to the territory that they feel they has been trespassed upon. Tinsel began his spraying behavior when we moved to a new house with lots of free-roaming intact males in the neighborhood that he could see through our windows. He definitely felt his territory was being invaded.

Other cats may begin spraying when new cats are brought into the home, often when the density of the cat population exceeds the carrying capacity of the housing space. Cats are essentially a solitary species, not a pack animal. While we can often succeed in convincing our feline friends to live in relatively compatible family groups, there is a sensitive equilibrium in the tribe that, once upset, is hard to regain. Many multiple-cat owners have bemoaned the decision to add "just one more cat," with resulting territorial spraying problems, only to discover that removing the new cat from the population doesn't necessarily make the spraying problem go away.

Behavior Modification Options

Litterbox remedies are generally ineffective in resolving a spraying challenge. Spraying is not simply a failure to use the litterbox. The two are distinctly different behavior challenges, and it is important to make the distinction. When a cat urinates, it is usually on a horizontal surface -- the floor just outside the litterbox, the comforter on the master bedroom bed, or the imported Shetland wool sweater lying on the arm of the sofa. Spraying is usually done on a vertical surface; the telltale evidence is often found on walls, doors, windows, scratching posts and other upright objects such as your spouse's pants leg. Long ago I rented a room for a time in a home with a spayed female cat who regularly sprayed the front of our communal toaster oven door. Woe to the roommate who neglected to clean the door prior to turning the oven on!

As with most, if not all behavior challenges, prevention is a far simpler approach than trying to fix things after the fact. Timely sterilization of young kittens is an effective way to preempt the onset of territorial spraying. It doesn't always work, however. Tinsel was neutered at six months of age, and still developed a spraying problem later on when we moved to a cat-laden neighborhood.

Once you have determined that you are, in fact, dealing with a spraying challenge,

it's time to take action. Of course, if you have not already spayed or neutered, do it yesterday. Ninety percent of male cats and 95% of females who were sterilized after the onset of the spraying behavior stopped their spraying as a result of the surgery, according to a 1973 study by B.L. Hart and R.E. Barrett. At the same time, have your veterinarian conduct a complete examination of your cat to be sure there are no medical conditions that could be causing or contributing to the spraying. If your spraying cat is already spayed or neutered or continues to spray following surgery, it's time to implement a behavior management and modification program.

Before you begin, you must clean your house thoroughly to remove any traces of cat spray from all anointed surfaces. Do the same outside your house, to remove any marks left by neighborhood cats. Be sure to use an enzyme-based cleaner such as Nature's Miracle in order to deactivate the odor-causing ingredients in cat spray. Regular household cleaners may do the job to our noses' satisfaction, but a cat's sense of smell is infinitely keener than ours; they can detect the smell long after we are convinced it's gone. You will need to repeat this drill regularly if neighbor cats are spraying the outside of your home, and anytime spraying recurs inside the house.

Reducing your cat's stress is an important key to modifying his spraying behavior. Spend some time observing and documenting his activities. Is there any consistency to when and where he sprays? These are important clues to the stressors that are causing him to spray. Is it always in the late afternoon by the window overlooking the back yard? Perhaps that's when Rocky, the neighbor's macho intact male Siamese is making his rounds. Ways to reduce the impact of this stressor could include talking to your neighbor about neutering Rocky (perhaps even offering to pay for the surgery, or helping to direct Rocky's senior citizen owner to a low-cost clinic and driving her there yourself); giving the neighbor convincing educational materials on why it's healthier for Rocky to live indoors; closing the blinds of the offended window or putting your cat in another room for a while in the afternoon so he can't see Rocky when he strolls through; or, if Rocky's owner is unapproachable, unresponsive, irresponsible or perhaps even nonexistent, collecting Rocky and taking him to your local animal shelter. You may have to resolve the guilt you feel about sending him to probable euthanasia, but your guilt should be offset by the vast improvement in your own cat's quality of life, and the knowledge that Rocky won't be out roaming around producing litters of baby kittens for whom there are not enough homes, or getting sick and dying a slow death from a deadly cat disease such as feline leukemia, feline aids, or feline infectious peritonitis.

If the participants in your spray wars are within your own household, the challenge is even greater. You will need to try to minimize the interaction between the spraying felines, and look to other measures to desensitize your combatants to each other. Your best bet is to remove them to separate parts of the house to give their arousal levels a chance to subside, and then introduce a desensitization and relaxation program. When they have had time to calm down, you can try a gradual reintroduction.

Gradual reintroduction works best if you combine it with counter conditioning. Right now, your cat's involuntary response to the presence of the cat who triggers the spraying behavior is "Yuck, BAD!" Counter conditioning changes his involuntary response when he sees the other cat to "Yay, GOOD!" The best way to do this is with food. Take Sprayer's favorite, yummiest-in-the-world kitty treat and put it away. From now on, he gets it only when he is in the presence of Trigger or of something that smells strongly of Trigger. After Sprayer has spent at least a week calming down in his own private quarters away from Trigger, carry Trigger's bed with you into Sprayer's room and set it down on the floor. As Sprayer approaches, start feeding him his yummy treats one after the other, non-stop for 30 – 60 seconds. Before he begins to lose his enthusiasm for the treats, pick up Trigger's bed and remove it from the room. Stop feeding the treats as soon as you remove the bed. Repeat this exercise several times a day with the bed or other items that are strongly associated with Trigger. You are trying to convince Sprayer that Trigger's presence (or the signs thereof) causes wonderful things to happen. If you

succeed, Sprayer will want Trigger to be around so that wonderful things can happen (i.e. – his favorite treats rain from the heavens).

When you get the sense that Sprayer immediately looks to you for yummys when he is in the presence of Trigger-scented objects, it is time to introduce Trigger himself, at a distance. While you sit in the far corner of Sprayer's room with Sprayer in your lap or next to you on the sofa or floor, have your assistant bring Trigger to the doorway, just where Sprayer can see him. Make treats rain from the heavens, non-stop, one at a time. After 5-10 seconds have your assistant leave with Trigger. Stop feeding treats. Repeat this several times a day if possible, several times per session, gradually increasing the length of time that Trigger stays in view, and gradually moving closer to the doorway with Sprayer. As long as all is going well, you can gradually move the counter conditioning exercises out into the rest of the house, and eventually return to a more normal lifestyle with the two cats – although you will always want to make sure good things happen to Sprayer when Trigger is around in order to reinforce the “Yay, GOOD” response that you have programmed into Sprayer's brain. If both cats are spraying, you will have your assistant feed treats to Trigger at the same time you are feeding treats to Sprayer.

Counter conditioning takes time and it isn't easy to be patient with the process. Nor is it always successful. As hard as it is to contemplate, you may at some point need to consider the painful step of placing one or more of your cats in a new home, if it appears that some of your cats' purrsonalities are simply incompatible with the others.

You Are Getting Sleepy...

Whether your cat's stressors are outdoors, within the home, or both, relaxation techniques can help him maintain his equanimity in the face of chaos. The calmer the household environment, the less stressed your cat will be. If yours is an active, noisy home, set up a quiet space for your cat, and when your six-year-old son has his friends over for games of race-through-the-house-and-yell, be clear that the cat's room is off-limits. Find a way to lock the door if necessary.

During quiet times, start doing massage and acupressure exercises with your cat. Most of us already love to stroke our cats, so learning a few easy techniques to maximize the benefits of that stroking is an easy task.

Short of resorting to medications prescribed by your veterinarian, you can also use herbal and homeopathic remedies to help calm your spraying cat. Some cat owners report great success with homeopathic remedies, such as Rescue Remedy from the Bach Flower Essences. Others have found calming herbs such as Catnip, Chamomile, Valerian, St. John's Wort, and Kava Kava to be effective. There are also pre-packaged calming remedies and stress formulas for cats available from various herbal retail sources. It is best to consult with a veterinarian who is knowledgeable in complementary medicine prior to administering these remedies to your cat; these herbs may be natural but they are not necessarily harmless – they work because they have active ingredients that affect your cat's systems in some manner. (For a list of holistic vets around the country, go to www.altvetmed.com.) You want to be sure your cat doesn't have any other medical condition that would preclude the use of herbs, and that you are not overdosing or combining herbs that may have a deleterious effect when used together.

Better Living Through Pharmaceutical Intervention

Although most of us prefer to take the least invasive approach possible when resolving our feline friends' behavioral problems, sometimes more drastic steps are necessary. Karen L. Overall, M.A., V.M.D., Ph.D., in her book *Clinical Behavioral Medicine For Small Animals*, lists Amitriptyline (Elavil), Buspirone (BuSpar), Clomipramine (Anafranil), Diazepam (Valium), Imipramine (Pamolar), and progestins as drugs that can be effective in controlling spraying. All of these are powerful chemicals with potential for serious side-effects, and should only be used in consultation with your veterinarian, after she has fully disclosed all the potential harm that may result from their use.

Most of these drugs were not available when Tinsel was a part of our family, nor

were the benefits of massage and acupressure widely known and accepted. We tried Diazepam. It stopped the spraying, but we hated how badly it drugged him. Besides, as soon as we tried to reduce the dosage, he started spraying again.

In confirmation of all of our fears, with his exposure to the outside world, Tinsel contracted a condition that we were unable to diagnose, and began wasting away at the young age of seven years. If I only knew then what I know now, we would have tried many more management and modification techniques, perhaps even some of the powerful pharmaceuticals, before sentencing him to life outdoors and a too-early death in my arms in the euthanasia room of my shelter. I will always regret that we couldn't do more for him.

Fortunately, thanks to advances in our knowledge of cat behavior and the benefits of complementary medicine, there is much we can do today for a sprayer before having to even consider making the painful choice between banishment outdoors, powerful drugs, or an abbreviated life.

A 10-STEP SPRAYING MODIFICATION PROGRAM

1. Spay or neuter your cat.
2. Have your vet conduct a complete examination of your cat to make sure there are no medical conditions that are causing or contributing to the spraying.
3. Clean your house thoroughly, inside and out, to remove any traces of spray.
4. Document your cat's spraying behavior – when, where, how often.
5. Identify likely triggers (stressors) for the spraying – neighbor cat, feral colony, your own cats, previous feline residents in the house, etc.
6. Develop an action plan to manage, minimize or eliminate each of the triggers you have identified.
7. Implement the action plan, including counter conditioning, while continuing to document the spraying behavior to determine the effectiveness of the plan. Modify the plan as necessary.
8. Learn and apply relaxation techniques such as acupressure, massage and T-Touch (see Resources).
9. Consult with a holistic veterinarian (www.altvetmed.com) about the use of calming herbs and homeopathic remedies.
10. If necessary, consult with a knowledgeable veterinarian about the use of pharmaceuticals to treat spraying behavior. Make a fully informed choice about whether to assume the risks that go along with the potential benefits of these drugs.

RESOURCES

The following are just a few of the many resources available to help you find natural approaches to resolving your cat's spraying challenge. An Internet search can turn up even more.

Acu-Cat: A Guide to Feline Acupressure by Nancy Zidonis & Amy Snow

The Healing Touch: The Proven Massage Program For Cats And Dogs by Michael W. Fox

The Tellington TTouch: A Revolutionary Natural Method To Train And Care For Your Favorite Animal by Linda Tellington-Jones

Cat Massage: A Whiskers-To-Tail Guide To Your Cat's Ultimate Petting Experience by Maryjean Ballner

The New Natural Cat by Anitra Frazier

The Complete Herbal Handbook For Dogs And Cats by Juliette de Bairacli Levy

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