

## 6 Signs Your Cat May Be Dealing With Separation Anxiety

A full 65% of cats are securely attached to their humans, which means they, too, can suffer from separation anxiety - a condition thought to affect only dogs. However, the signs in kitties tend to be different. Know how to identify it in your pet, and the five things you can do to help soothe her.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you're a pet parent to a cat, you know from experience what scientific research has recently proven: like dogs and children, feline family members also form secure (and insecure) bonds with their humans
- Researchers have also concluded that like dogs, the majority of cats are securely attached to their humans, which means that they, too, can develop feline separation anxiety under certain circumstances
- Risk factors for separation anxiety in cats include being orphaned or weaned too early, and living in an environment that isn't conducive to confidence-building
- Signs of feline separation anxiety include crying or meowing excessively when favorite humans are away, refusing to eat, eliminating outside the litterbox, and grooming excessively
- There are many ways to relieve your kitty's separation anxiety, starting with environmental enrichment and lifestyle optimization

Many cat parents are shocked to discover that their independent, aloof feline family member may be dealing with separation anxiety, which is a stress response to being apart from a person or other animal to whom they're attached. Even if you're familiar with **separation anxiety in a dog**, you may not recognize the condition in your cat.

While many would maintain that cats are generally considered less social than dogs, research suggests that kitties are certainly not anti-social, and this is especially true when it comes to their bond with their favorite humans.<sup>1,2</sup>

In fact, in 2019 a team of researchers at Oregon State University scientifically confirmed what cat guardians the world over have always known — our feline family members **love and bond with us**. Their research shows that, just like kids and canines, cats form secure and insecure bonds with their humans.<sup>3</sup> From a ScienceDaily article on the study results:

*"Cats have a reputation for being aloof and independent. But a study of the way domestic cats respond to their caregivers suggests that their socio-cognitive abilities and the depth of their human attachments have been underestimated. The findings show that, much like children and dogs, pet cats form secure and insecure bonds with their human caretakers."<sup>4</sup>*

## 65% of Cats Are Securely Attached to Their Humans

*"Like dogs, cats display social flexibility in regard to their attachments with humans," said lead study author Kristyn Vitale of Oregon State University. "The majority of cats are securely attached to their owner and use them as a source of security in a novel environment."*<sup>5</sup>

Past attachment research using the Secure Base Test (SBT), an abbreviated strange situation test, has shown that securely attached infants, primates and dogs behave similarly when reunited with their caregiver following a brief absence in an unfamiliar environment. When their caregiver reappears, they quickly return to relaxed exploration of their surroundings, whereas insecure individuals either cling excessively to or avoid the caregiver when he or she returns.

In the study, adult cats and kittens from three to eight months of age spent two minutes in an unfamiliar room with their caregiver, followed by two minutes alone, followed by a two-minute reunion with the caregiver. The cats' responses to being reunited with their caregivers were classified into attachment styles (secure or insecure).

The researchers observed that cats bond in a way that's amazingly similar to infants. In humans, 65% of babies are securely attached to their caregiver, and this study showed that about 65% of both cats and kittens are securely bonded to their human. Further, the findings show that cats' attachments to their people are stable and present in adulthood. According to Vitale, this social flexibility may have helped cats successfully adapt to living in human homes.

## Risk Factors for Feline Separation Anxiety

Since science has established that cats and dogs have similar attachment styles with regard to their humans, and since we know many dogs today develop separation anxiety, it's important to explore whether cats may also suffer from the condition. It seems counterintuitive given the feline reputation for independence and indifference, however, as we learn more about the significance of the human-cat bond, the notion of separation anxiety in kitties seems less far-fetched.

*"Cats with separation anxiety don't howl and bay like dogs and they don't chew on doors and windowsills in frantic attempts to escape," writes veterinary behaviorist Dr. Nicholas Dodman, professor emeritus at Tufts University. "Their misery is far less obvious, and it sometimes takes a sleuth of an owner to appreciate what is going on."*

*"Separation anxiety in any species implies a lack of confidence and an over-dependence on others. It is likely that genetic factors play a role in increasing susceptibility to separation anxiety though environmental factors are ultimately responsible for its expression. Genetic factors include emotional sensitivity and a predisposition toward anxiety. Certain oriental breeds, such as **Siamese and Burmese**, may be more prone to develop separation anxiety than cats with more robust temperaments, like Maine Coons."*<sup>6</sup>

According to The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, some indoor cats who are the only felines in the home become anxious when left alone for extended periods of time. These kitties are characterized as "unusually sensitive to their surroundings" and may be very attached to their humans.<sup>7</sup>

Feline behavior expert Pam Johnson-Bennett suggests that cats prone to separation anxiety include:<sup>8</sup>

- Cats who were orphaned
- Cats who were weaned too early
- Cats whose environments don't offer a variety of activities that build confidence
- Cats whose clingy, needy behavior is rewarded by their humans
- Cats who were getting along fine until a specific event (e.g., a change in work schedule, a vacation or a divorce) served as the trigger for separation anxiety

## Signs of Separation Anxiety in Cats

Since cats aren't really followers, if yours is trailing you from room to room throughout the house and you're not carrying her food bowl, the behavior could suggest separation anxiety. She may also display "pre-departure anxiety" when she knows you're leaving, which can take the form of meowing, sulking, appearing depressed, slinking away, and hiding. When their human leaves the house, cats with separation distress may:

- Cry, moan or meow excessively
- Vomit (only when left alone)
- Refuse to eat or drink anything
- Groom excessively
- Eat too fast
- Engage in destructive behavior
- Eliminate outside the litterbox, possibly on their human's belongings\*
- Enthusiastically greet their owner's return

\*Johnson-Bennett notes that while this can feel like a spiteful act to a human who returns home to find cat poop on the bed, "it's really a way for kitty to self-soothe by mixing his scent with yours. It's also a way that the cat attempts to help you 'find' your way home. Think of it as the feline version of dropping breadcrumbs along the path."

## How to Help a Cat With Separation Anxiety

It's best not to diagnose your cat with separation anxiety until your veterinarian has ruled out other possible underlying causes for the behavior. For example, there are both medical and behavioral reasons cats eliminate outside the litterbox that have nothing to do with separation distress. The same goes for excessive grooming and abnormal eating habits.

Since a cat's behavior is very often the first indication of an underlying medical problem, I recommend taking your kitty for a wellness visit with your veterinarian if you haven't done so in the last few months.

Once he's seen the vet and assuming he's in good health, the next item on your to-do list is to ensure his environment and lifestyle are optimal.

Johnson-Bennett recommends that you inspire confidence in your cat when you interact with him, and that you engage him in interactive play sessions each day:

*"Don't reward your cat with attention when he's meowing and being insistent. Instead, reward him with petting, treats, praise and attention when he's acting the way you WANT him to act. Reward him when he's quiet. Reward him when he does something to entertain himself. Reward the behavior you want to see again and don't reinforce the unwanted behavior.*

*"Engage your cat in interactive play sessions on a daily basis. Twice a day would actually be even better. Interactive playtime allows your cat to simply enjoy being the mighty hunter. For a cat, being able to engage the prey drive and enjoy a successful capture is the ultimate in joy and satisfaction."*

It's also important to **practice coming and going**, and to avoid creating drama when you leave the house:

*"If you anticipate your cat is going to suffer from separation anxiety, you'll just make it worse if you overdo the goodbye process," says Johnson-Bennett. "Your cat will think you're leaving for a month instead of just 8 hours. Make your goodbyes very casual. Cats easily pick up on the emotions of their human family members. If you're upset then your cat may get upset."*

## Additional Recommendations

- **Calming music** — Cats dislike loud music but white noise or soft classical music may provide a calming distraction. A team of researchers actually collaborated with a musician to create **music that appeals to cats** based on natural feline vocalizations.
- **Pheromones** — Invest in a pheromone diffuser, such as the Feliway diffuser for cats. Species-specific pheromones are chemical substances that can positively affect an animal's emotional state and behavior.
- **Flower essences** — Cats are very sensitive to scents, and **flower essences** are gentle enough to not be offensive, but very beneficial for emotional support. Flower essences are safe to use topically on cats as well as in their water.
- **Essential oils** — Although caution must be exercised when using essential oils around cats, Dr. Melissa Shelton, a holistic and integrative veterinarian in Minnesota, has developed a line of oil blends specifically for diffusion around cats, including a calming blend made from German chamomile, clary sage, ylang ylang, frankincense and more. The essential oil of lavender has also been proven to reduce pets' stress response. Always choose a water diffusion method and make sure your cat can leave the room the diffuser is in, if they choose to. Hydrosols are also a safer choice with cats.
- **Herbal remedies and supplements** — Talk to your holistic or integrative veterinarian about specific homeopathics, calming herbs and nutraceuticals that help cats adapt to changes in routines, including calming valerian, l-theanine, ashwagandha, rhodiola, hemp CBD, holy basil (Tulsi) and chamomile.

## Sources and References

[Pets Radar, July 9, 2023](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Edwards, C. et al. Journal of Veterinary Behavior Clinical Applications and Research 2\(4\):119-125, July 2007](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Eriksson, M. et al. Cats and owners interact more with each other after a longer duration of separation, PLOS ONE, October 18, 2017](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Kristyn R. Vitale, Alexandra C. Behnke, Monique A.R. Udell. Attachment bonds between domestic cats and humans. Current Biology, 2019; 29 \(18\): R864](#)

<sup>4,5</sup> [ScienceDaily, September 23, 2019](#)

<sup>6</sup> [PetPlace, December 19, 2014](#)

<sup>7</sup> [The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine Indoor Pet Initiative](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Cat Behavior Associates, Separation Anxiety](#)