

A Proven Technique to Build Rapport With Your Cat

Providing a rare insight into the world of cat-human communication, this UK study confirms what many already suspected - cats are positively attracted to humans who do this, especially if that person is their special human. Is your cat already doing it, and you're just missing her cues?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent U.K. study confirms what animal behaviorists and cat parents already suspected or knew: cats are attracted to humans who narrow their eyes and slow blink in their direction
- It's possible cat parents inadvertently trained cats to slow blink; it's also possible cats do it to discourage humans from staring at them, which can feel threatening
- Our feline family members show love and affection for us in a variety of other ways as well, including sitting on, kneading, and bunny-kicking us, and of course, purring

In 2020, a team of researchers in the U.K. published a paper that showed for the first time that it's possible "build rapport with a cat by using an eye narrowing technique with them."¹ This is the first scientific study of its kind that confirms what feline behavior experts — along with countless cat parents — have known for years!

Cats Respond When We Give Them the 'Narrow Eye'

The study, titled "The role of cat eye narrowing movements in cat-human communication," is the work of a team of psychologists at the Universities of Sussex and Portsmouth in the U.K., and was published in the Nature journal Scientific Reports.²

According to animal behavior scientists and lead researchers Dr. Tasmin Humphrey and Professor Karen McComb, when we narrow our eyes and "slow blink," cats find us attractive similar to the way humans respond when another human smiles at them.

For the study, the researchers conducted two experiments. The first involved 21 cats — 10 males and 11 females with an age range of about 6 months to 16 years — and their 14 owners. The experiment took place in each cat's home, and the researchers showed the owners how to slow blink. Once each cat had settled into one place, the owners were asked to sit about 3 feet away.

The second experiment involved 24 additional cats from 8 different households, 12 males and 12 females, with ages ranging from 1 to 17 years. The researchers, who were strangers to the cats, either slow blinked at them or adopted a neutral face without direct eye contact. They also offered the cats a flat hand, palm up while sitting or crouching directly in front them. Both experiments were video recorded.

The researchers observed that the cats were more likely to slow blink at their owners if their owners had slowed blinked at them, compared to when the owner was present in the room but not delivering a slow blink. They were also more likely to slow blink when an unfamiliar person slow blinked at them, compared to when the stranger's expression was neutral.

In addition, the cats were more likely to approach the researcher's outstretched hand after they slow blinked than if they maintained a neutral expression.

Did Humans Unconsciously Teach Cats to Slow Blink?

When it comes to the question of why cats behave in this way, Humphrey posits that perhaps cats developed the slow blink because humans perceive slow blinking as positive. They may have learned that humans reward them for responding to slow blinking.

Another theory is that slow blinking may have begun as a way to interrupt an unbroken stare, which feels potentially threatening to cats. In any event, these study results suggest that the slow blinking technique can provide a form of positive communication between cats and humans.

"Our findings could potentially be used to assess the welfare of cats in a variety of settings, including veterinary practices and shelters," says Humphrey.³

And according to study co-author Dr. Leanne Proops of the University of Portsmouth, "It's definitely not easy to study natural cat behavior so these results provide a rare insight into the world of cat-human communication."⁴

Interestingly, previous research into the psychology of cats suggests they employ "solicitation purring" to attract and manipulate human attention. They can also distinguish their names from other words, even when someone unfamiliar calls to them. And like dogs, cats may be sensitive to human emotional cues and respond by rubbing or butting their head against their sad human.

Jackson Galaxy Explains the 'I Love You' Blink

Jackson Galaxy, aka "Cat Daddy" is an expert on the "I love you" blink. In my 2014 [**interview with Jackson**](#), he explained that most cats do the blink, but many cat parents don't realize what it is. It's a slow, intentional blink. The reason Jackson coined it the I Love You Blink is so humans can put intention behind it.

It goes like this: When you look at your cat with your eyes open, you're silently saying "I." Then when you slowly close your eyes, you're completing the silent phrase with "love you." You've told your cat "I love you" with your eyes. You've intentionally sent that message with your eyes. You'll notice that your cat will begin to return that blink to you.

The importance of the blink can't be overstated, according to Jackson. He says it's our "Rosetta Stone" — our one and only means of meeting our cats at the "communicative fence." When your cat meows, he's attempting to jump over to your side of the fence. When you play with your cat, you're trying to jump over to his side. The I Love You Blink lets the two of you meet right in the middle.

It's a way of saying "I love you." When a cat closes his eyes in your presence, he's saying "I allow myself to be vulnerable to you, a potential predator." That's a big deal. And so, we respond in kind with our own blink. Cats add to the blink with other subtle behaviors that mean different things, but it all starts from the I Love You Blink. And that's a great place to start!

8 More Ways Your Cat Says 'I Love You'

In addition to the I Love You Blink and head butting, your feline family member may express her affection for you in a variety of other ways.

1. He sits on you — If whenever you sit down your cat settles onto your lap (or perches on your shoulder or even your head), he's showing he trusts and feels safe with you, and wants to feel connected to you. He may also approve of the clothes you're wearing because they're soft or smell like you, and also, you're nice and warm!

2. She rolls around on her back, exposing her belly — This is typically a greeting behavior, and when your cat does it, she's showing you she feels relaxed, comfortable, and trusting in your presence. What she's very likely not doing, despite appearances, is asking for a tummy rub, which is why she may dig her sharp claws into your arm if you attempt one. Instead, give her head a gentle scratch.

Most cats (not all, but most) don't enjoy belly rubs. This is because if your kitty lived in the wild, predators would be a constant threat. The most vulnerable spot on your cat's body is her belly. Just beneath the surface of that silky skin lie all her vital organs.

3. He kneads you — Also known as "making bread" or "making biscuits," kneading is an instinctive feline behavior kittens display shortly after they're born to stimulate the flow of milk from the mother's mammary glands. Adult cats who continue the behavior might be showing contentment, self-soothing when they feel stressed, or marking their human with the scent from the sweat glands in their paws.

Kneading is also linked to feline mating rituals. Some intact female cats knead more frequently as they're going into heat, while male cats usually become aggressive after kneading for a while. The behavior might also have its origins in wild cats who build nesting places with grass and leaves in which to rest or give birth, since kneading in most pet cats precedes settling down for a snooze.

4. She approaches you with her tail pointing straight up — When your cat walks toward you with her tail straight up in the air and perhaps with a slight kink at the tip, she's happily greeting you. Be sure to acknowledge her "hello" and give her a gentle head or face scratch.

5. He bunny-kicks you — Bunny kicking, also called rabbit kicking, is when your cat rolls onto his back or side and kicks with his hind legs. While this behavior sounds harmless, and even cute, it depends on why kitty is doing it. There are playtime bunny kicks that typically involve your cat grasping your hand or wrist with his front paws while he kicks your arm.

However, depending on how he interprets your movements in response, those bunny kicks can quickly become more intense and aggressive (and painful). This is one of the reasons feline behavior experts advise against using your hands or feet during play with your cat. Instead, use cat toys, and if your kitty is a bunny kicker, consider investing in a few nontoxic kickable cat toys infused with organic catnip.

6. She gives you love bites — This show of love from your kitty can be a bit painful, especially if she nips at your nose or elsewhere on your face, as many cats do. Kitties nip each other affectionately, and their skin is tougher than ours, so your cat really doesn't understand her love bite isn't always pleasant for you.

Nipping seems to be an instinctive drive in some cats and so it's difficult to stop the behavior. But since it's pretty easy to predict when you're about to get "love bit," the best plan is to quickly get your face, finger or other body part out of her line of sight!

7. He sleeps on you — Your cat is most vulnerable when he's sleeping, so where he chooses to snooze must feel safe and secure to him. If one of his favorite nap spots happens to be somewhere on your body, consider yourself well-loved by your kitty.

8. She purrs — Newborn kittens can't yet see, so they're guided to their mother by her purr. That's why purring is a sign your cat is feeling content. Purring also lowers kitty's heart rate, so she may sometimes purr to sooth herself. Unless she's ill or feeling stressed, rest assured her purring means she feels cared for by you.

An added bonus: research shows the sound of a cat's purr can lower your blood pressure and reduce stress!

Sources & References

[Science Alert, November 16, 2022](#)

[1,3,4 SciTechDaily, October 11, 2020](#)

[2 Humphrey, T. et al. The role of cat eye narrowing movements in cat-human communication. Scientific Reports volume 10, Article number: 16503 \(2020\).](#)

Today's Pet Video:

Stray Cat Chooses His (Her) Family

A small tortoiseshell kitty started hanging out around their patio. They fed him, naturally, and named him Kevin. Then they learned Kevin was a girl and that she was pregnant!
