Solving Problem Behaviors: The Process

Before you can create a solution, you need to know exactly what each owner considers a problem behavior to be. Some might not want their cats to jump up on their desks, while others will encourage their cats to leap up and provide a welcome break. Individual preferences will vary greatly. ⁵⁵

Identify the ABCs

In order to solve a problem behavior, the first step needs to be identifying the ABCs: Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence. In other words, you need to discover what is causing the behavior; discuss the behaviors’ details; and determine the behavior’s consequence(s).

Antecedent

An antecedent is a preceding event, condition or cause. ⁵⁶ Figuring out what caused the problem behavior is essential to finding a solution. Depending on the situation and the problem behavior, you might: 1) discover multiple antecedents; 2) determine that cause is unclear or 3) decide it is an expression of an instinctive behavior. ⁵⁷

For example, a family’s son moves out and takes his Chihuahua with him. After this, the cat begins to vocalize excessively during the night, disrupting the family’s sleep. In this case, there are multiple possible precipitating factors, since both the son and dog have left the house. ⁵⁸

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In another example, a cat begins scratching a new fabric-covered chair; however she is not scratching the leather couch. It is likely the cat is acting on her instinct to scratch and/or mark her territory.

**Behavior**

Discuss the details of the problem behavior, i.e., when, where and how, and make certain it is not caused by any underlying, unresolved medical issues.

In the previous example of excessive nighttime vocalization, the behavior’s details are:

- **When:** at night
- **Where:** throughout the house
- **How:** meowing loudly

Note: Before creating a solution, you should advise the owners to take their cat to a veterinarian as some causes for excessive vocalization can be dementia or pain.

For the scratching example, the details are:

- **When:** occasionally, but not always
- **Where:** the living room
- **How:** determined, she scratches with intent

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Consequences

What are the consequences of the behavior? From the cat’s perspective, what happens after the behavior occurs? When the cat meowed at night, someone would get up and tell her to be quiet, or give her some food to make her quiet. Her nightly meowing resulted in attention and/or food.

When the cat scratched the new chair, she satisfied her instinctual need. The consequences for her include marking her territory, removing the outermost layer of her claws and/or stretching her back muscles, as well as being yelled at by her owner.

Determine Motivation

What is the motivation driving a behavior? Cats will not perform a behavior out of spite, malice or revenge. Instead, they will perform a behavior because it is rewarding in some way. In most cases, a behavior’s consequences and motivation will overlap.

Some behaviors are self-rewarding—especially instinctive ones—such as scratching. Scratching allows cats to mark territory with their paws’ scent glands, remove the outer layer of their claws, stretch their muscles, etc.

Vocalizing excessively at night allows a cat to gain attention, food, or both. This made the behavior of meowing at night rewarding.

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Management, Prevention and Solutions

You will need to determine if the behavior can be prevented and/or managed. In some cases, the behavior will still be present; however, it will no longer be invasive and/or destructive. Excluding any underlying medical causes, a problem behavior will either be self-rewarding or human-rewarded.

Self-Rewarding Behaviors

To solve a self-rewarding behavior, owners must eliminate its rewarding aspect, and provide a more rewarding alternative.

For the cat scratching the chair, her owners should apply double-sided (furniture safe) tape on it, which makes the behavior unpleasant and unrewarding. Next, the owners must place appropriate scratchers in a several locations, including territorially significant areas, such as regularly visited ones.

Whenever the owners see their cat scratching the correct items, they should praise and reward her. These actions allow the cat to express the needed, instinctive behavior without harming the chair. They also make using the providing scratchers preferable and thus more rewarding than scratching the chair.

It is imperative that owners complete both actions. Making a behavior less self-rewarding will always be ineffective without providing alternatives. In the above example, the alternatives are the several scratchers. Owners must provide their cat with scratchers, otherwise she will use other inappropriate items, such as a couch or drapes. Once a cat uses only the scratchers, the sticky tape can be removed.
Human-Rewarded Behaviors

If a behavior is inadvertently rewarded by owners, once they cease rewarding it, the behavior will eventually stop. You will need to forewarn the owners that an extinction burst will often occur before the behavior stops.

In simplest terms, it means it will get worse before it gets better. The cat will initially try harder to get the reward she previously did, before she realizes one is no longer forthcoming.\(^73\) During this time, it is imperative that the owners do not “give in” to the cat, since this will reinforce the behavior with intermittent rewards, ultimately strengthening it and resulting in an even longer extinction burst.\(^74\) (Refer to Stage 2 to review extinction bursts.)

In the example of the cat vocalizing at night, as hard as it might be, her owners must ignore her when she meows at night.\(^75\) She will eventually learn that meowing at night does not result in any rewards. In addition, her behavior is most likely caused by a decrease in daytime activity. The cat had probably played with the son and/or his Chihuahua dog and because they are gone she now has excess energy.

This can be managed in a variety of ways. First and foremost, family members should play with the cat regularly to help her expend energy.\(^76\) In addition, the owners should give her solo interactive toys for extra mental and physical stimulation.\(^77\)

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Ineffective Techniques

Whether owners want to stop their cat from jumping onto counters, scratching furniture or performing any other behavior, squirt bottles, shouting and/or swatting at a cat, and other forms of direct punishment will be ineffective.\(^78\)

For example, if owners use a squirt bottle to keep their cat off certain areas, she will learn to stay off the areas only when they are around. If they swat at her when she starts to scratch the couch, she will learn to stay off only to avoid scratching when her owners are nearby.\(^79\)

She will also inevitably begin to associate her owners’ presence with hostile actions,\(^80\) which will damage the bond between her and her owners.\(^81\)

This is why double-sided tape, foil, and other disagreeable surfaces should be added to forbidden areas.\(^82\) Owners can praise and reward their cat for choosing to scratch or jump up onto the right locations whenever they see the cat making the correct choice.\(^83\) In the cat’s mind, the unpleasant location (whether it is a couch or a counter) is “punishing” her, while her owners are sources of praise, treats and happiness.\(^84\)

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Section Review

1. List and briefly describe the ABCs of cat behavior:

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2. How would you identify the ABCs of a behavior?

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3. How would you determine a cat’s motivation for a particular behavior?

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4. Why is it important to determine if a behavior can be prevented or managed?

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5. Explain the differences between self-rewarding and human-rewarded behaviors:

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6. Provide an example of how a cat owner could resolve a self-rewarding behavior:
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7. Provide an example of how an cat owner could resolve a human-rewarded behavior:
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8. What might be the initial result of resolving a human-rewarded behavior?
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9. Describe some ineffective techniques for solving behavior problems:
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10. Why should any type of direct punishment be avoided when modifying a cat’s behavior?
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Problem Behaviors

Inappropriate Elimination

Inappropriate urination (or urination outside the litterbox) is the No. 1 reason why owners surrender their cats to animal shelters.\(^\text{85}\) There are two distinct types of inappropriate elimination—litterbox avoidance and marking/spraying behavior—and each has a different behavioral source and requires different management techniques.\(^\text{86}\)

You will need to educate owners on the difference between regular urination and spraying. Urinating cats will squat down to eliminate. Spraying cats will back up to a target and stand with their rear high; then with their tail erect and quivering, they will squirt a stream of urine.\(^\text{87}\)

Owners should never punish their cats for inappropriate elimination, as the cause is always stress of some type, and punishment will only cause additional stress.\(^\text{88}\)

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