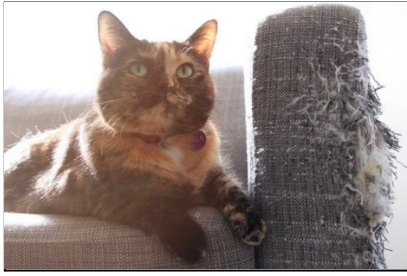


Destructive Behavior in Cats



When cats display destructive behavior, they're expressing natural instincts for self-care, hunting, exploring, and play. If we want our stuff to remain intact, we have to find other avenues for those instincts that are more appropriate. Managing destructive behavior is about making our human-centric homes a bit more feline-friendly, which leaves everybody happier (including our wallets).

Scratching and clawing:

The most common destructive behavior by cats is finding upholstered furniture or rugs and putting their claws to work. They do this for a couple of reasons: (1) to break off the hollow bits of their nails (called sheaths) that don't receive blood supply so they can make room for the newer, sharper bits underneath, and (2) to mark their territory through scent (undetectable by our human noses) from glands in their paws.

Since scratching is a natural behavior, make sure you have a place where they can express these instincts: cat scratchers. We recommend getting some options for your cat and placing them in any socially important area in your home. There are inexpensive cardboard ones in all kinds of shapes, ones that hang on your doorknob, and the old standby – the scratching post. From cardboard to carpet, sisal to seagrass, you can find all kinds of materials, heights, shapes, and angles for your cat.

It can take a bit of convincing to use the scratchers instead of your furniture, and in all likelihood, you're not going to get a 100% success rate even once they've been convinced. But there are things that encourage use. Most cardboard scratchers will come with packets of catnip to sprinkle over it; there are also catnip sprays that you can use on any of the surfaces you want to convince your cat to use. Feliway, the company that makes the synthetic cat pheromones we use for our residents and veterinary patients to help calm them, also makes a product called "Feliscratch," which mimics the territory pheromone. Drawing them to the preferred option with some of those methods, and then rewarding them for their choice, will encourage them to keep using the method of claw-sheath removal that keeps the whole household happy.

Important Note on Declawing

There was a time where the wisdom around preventing cats from scratching us or our furniture was to remove their claws. Just like many medical practices of yore, **we have since learned that declawing is an inhumane, painful, and entirely unnecessary process.**

Declawing is not just removing their nails; in order to prevent the nail from growing back, a piece of the cat's bones need to be removed. Declawing can cause severe pain, trauma, and ongoing issues including increased biting, house soiling, and anxiety.

Scratching is a natural and healthy feline behavior so keeping a cat's nails trimmed, using deterrents on furniture while also offering appropriate places for your cat to scratch, and products like nail caps can all help reduce scratching while also keeping our cats' paws intact.

Knocking things over:

Among the most meme-able cat behavior but less entertaining when it happens with your cat in your home, is the old knock-things-off-surfaces-to-watch-them-fall trick. We're not really sure why cats do this, but we do have a few ideas. It could be boredom, it could be part of their hunting instinct, it could be for attention, and it could be none or some combination of those things.



What we do know is just like any problem, sometimes it's about prevention. Cats can't knock things over if they don't have access, so putting things out of reach is step one. In terms of tackling the cat's behavior, our best recommendation is to make sure they're getting enough play and enrichment. Cats should get at least 30 minutes of designated playtime each day. It doesn't have to all be in one sitting – you're going to want to let your cat call the shots on how long they're willing to play – but we do recommend doing it around the same time every day. Cats thrive on structure and routine, and keeping their schedule predictable will reduce their stress.

Rough play is totally normal behavior, and it doesn't mean you have an aggressive cat. A couple of things are really important to keep in mind here:

- **Cats, just like any animal, learn best through positive reinforcement.** If you have been wiggling your fingers at them to get them to engage their hunting instinct, you are positively reinforcing that fingers are toys for them to play with. Instead, to get them out of the habit, redirect them when they use your body parts as toys, and reward them (with treats, attention, and play) when they choose appropriate outlets for their play (i.e. toys or their consenting feline friends).
- **Any cat can get overstimulated** and start engaging in rough play. Some cats have lower thresholds for what their brain can handle than others, so figure out where your cat's boundaries are and be mindful of them. You can start to build their tolerance slowly, over time, by continuing to respect their boundaries, ending playtime on a high note, and directing them toward a mentally stimulating task like a food puzzle or positive reinforcement training (you can, indeed, teach a cat tricks!) to close out playtime and wind them down.



Remember that cats are not intentionally malicious or expressing any type of human emotion like "revenge". They are felines and their behaviors are natural to their species.