



Recognizing & Treating Feline Depression

When "Bear," a sleek black cat, lost his two companions, Calie and Moose, he quickly changed. Over-eating, constant meowing, and a neediness developed that Christie and Dave Black had not seen before. Physical symptoms of depression followed, including hair loss and faded brown spots in his fur. "Bear was not the fun and animated cat we knew - it was heartbreaking," recalls Christie. Today experts offer strategies to avoid depression in cats, and treatment options for when it's unavoidable.

Recognizing depression in your cat -

Pam Johnson-Bennett, a Certified Animal Behavior Consultant, says depression is often missed, since owners may not notice the increased sleeping or subtle change in mood over time. "The human family simply gets used to the gradual decline in the cat's usual behavior," says Johnson-Bennett. In fact, a key to recognizing depression is to watch for behavior that deviates substantially from what's "normal" for your cat, especially in the areas of eating, sleeping, playing, grooming, or litter box habits.

According to Dr. Lore Haug, an animal behaviorist with Texas A&M University, "play behavior will be one of the first behaviors that disappear," says Haug. The cat may show a disinterest in their family or companion animals, and may find an isolated place to hide for long periods of time.

The causes of depression -

Dr. Cori Gross, a veterinary field educator, says the first step is to make sure there are no underlying medical problems, by visiting the veterinarian. While hiding and over-grooming are common signs of depression, these behaviors can mask medical conditions. "Cats that hide may actually be in pain. Cats that over-groom may have a skin problem, such as allergies," says Gross.

Once a physical cause is ruled out, the cat's environment is the next place to look. Dr. Katherine Miller, a senior behavior counselor with the ASPCA, explains, "cats thrive in predictable, stable environments and therefore are very sensitive to even relatively minor changes in their world." She stresses that cats, like Bear, who lose a companion animal are especially prone to depression.

Feline depression can result from major life changes, such as the loss or addition of a family member, or from minor changes. Some cats experience depression simply from a less than ideal environment. "An example of this would be a cat that does not have enough clean litter boxes in the house. This kitty might start to urinate outside of the box," says Gross.

Johnson-Bennett sees many feline depression cases caused by the hectic nature of today's families. In a recent case, the depression was caused by the separation of the husband and wife. "The event was so traumatic for the human family, that they didn't notice the cat was affected as well," says

Johnson-Bennett. She advised the family to create more opportunities for the cat to have fun and to divide up the responsibilities between family members so that everyone got one-on-one time with a now happier, cat.

Treating depression -

Treatment options range from behavior counseling to drug therapy. "Basically, it involves helping your cat find that spark in life again," says Johnson-Bennett. Often a little extra attention during times of stress can help alleviate the symptoms.

Gross sees behavior modification as a good next step. In cases where a newborn baby is the stressor, she tells clients to give the cat a treat whenever the baby is around to create a positive association. Haug suggests owners schedule a few rounds of quality time with their cat each day for grooming, training or just playing.

Anti-depressants can also be useful, as a last resort. Our experts caution that they should be used along with behavioral modification and may have serious side effects requiring close supervision by a professional. Miller suggests non-prescription alternatives, such as Rescue Remedy (essences of Bach flowers) and Feliway (synthetic version of a natural cat pheromone) are useful. In addition, catnip toys can be used to improve the cat's mood and renew their interest in playtime.

Avoiding depression -

Of course, the healthiest course is to avoid depression altogether. Miller insists that a yearly visit to the vet can prevent depression caused by a medical condition. Keeping a daily routine, with scheduled meals, playtime and grooming will help avoid depression caused by the environment.

Gross adds, "the best way to prevent behavioral disorders such as depression and anxiety is to provide your cat with a cat-friendly, low-stress environment." This includes having enough (and clean) litter boxes, scratching posts, perches and toys to keep a cat occupied. Providing a private, quiet place for your cat to enjoy some alone-time is also ideal.

When it comes to spotting feline depression, Johnson-Bennett advises, "pay attention to what your cat's usual behavior is, so you'll be alerted to any change." When Dave and Christie noticed changes in Bear they sought out the advice of their veterinarian. "Our vet recommended a new cat, as well as removing the other cats' scents slowly and deliberately," recalls Christie. She wasn't sure if her heart was ready to embrace another animal, but she considered Bear's feelings. "He had never been alone and letting him grieve alone was too much," says Christie. After adding a kitten named "Emmy" to their family, she has seen positive changes in Bear and now feels good about following her veterinarian's advice. "Bear is still having a hard time, but as we all get further away from the actual deaths and are spending more time together, it's getting better day by day," says Christie.