

Help! My cat needs (play) therapy!

By [Calgary Humane](#) on June 11, 2014

We all know “that” cat. You know, the cat that pesters other cats relentlessly, yowls through the midnight hours or earns the nickname “land shark” due to a proclivity for hunting ankles? Yeah, “that” cat.

Cat behaviors can be frustrating... but they don't have to be! Today on the blog, we bring you play therapy... for cats!

So why do some cats turn in to “that” cat?

As obligate carnivores, cats are built to hunt. House cats still have this natural instinct to hunt, but often lack access to appropriate hunting targets and are fed plenty of high quality food without doing any work. The cat has no outlet for his or her natural hunting instincts and energy!

Cats as an “energetic balloon”.

This term is borrowed from Jackson Galaxy, a cat behaviorist working in the United States. He creates an image as the cat being a “balloon” for energy. Activities like eating, petting and attention from people put energy in to the balloon, but what happens if there is no way to get energy OUT of the balloon? Many of the ‘problem’ behaviors that cat owners report (inappropriate scratching, yowling at night, fighting with other cats, hunting ankles and biting) can be a result of a cat having no appropriate outlet to release energy. This pent up energy builds up like a pressure cooker or an overfilled balloon.

So what does ‘play therapy’ have to do with this?

Play therapy gives the cat a completely appropriate outlet for all of that energy! Cats tend to expend energy in short, concentrated bursts of activity, so even a short play therapy session of 15-20 minutes a couple of times a day can be enough to help a cat stay balanced. The key to play therapy sessions is that the play needs to get the cat working hard both mentally and physically.

OK, so I just play with my cat?

Yes, but at the right time. Play therapy needs to be timed properly to help fulfill an important cat mantra:

Hunt. Catch. Kill. Eat. Groom. Sleep.

This is what cats want to do, in this order, every day. Hunt, catch, kill, eat, groom, sleep. So the ideal time for play therapy is right before a cat's regular meal time.

What kind of play should we be doing?

Glad you asked! Choose toys that will satisfy those hunting instincts. Wand toys with feathers or stuffed mice are ideal. When using the toy, try to copy the movements of that type of prey. Start slowly then add erratic movements as your cat's attention is



captured. The goal is to “wind up” your cat and get them really working hard to catch that prey. Think cardio workout. You really want to get your cat’s blood pumping. When the cat catches the toy, wiggle it around to encourage the cat to “kill” the toy by biting or kicking it.

Can I use a laser light instead?

Laser toys can be great to start, but they do not allow a cat to “catch” or “kill” the fake prey. If your cat loves laser pointers, try using a laser pointer to catch their attention at the beginning then use the laser pointer to bring your cat’s interest to the wand toy. It may take a few sessions before your cat becomes interested in the non-laser toy, but keep trying! Some cats are just die hard laser fans that could not care less about other toys. If this is your cat, then just make sure that they are not becoming frustrated when they cannot catch the laser.

Alright, we have played for 15 minutes, now what?

After hunting, catching and killing comes eating! Consider using a puzzle ball or interactive cat feeder to help mentally exercise your kitty during meal time. There are several models of puzzle feeders available with different difficulties depending on your cat’s experience with problem solving. This will not only exercise the cat’s brain, but it will also slow down their eating. If you have a cat that gulps down their food and vomits, a puzzle feeder or interactive feeder is a great way to prevent this “gulp and gag” behavior. If it is not meal time, feed your cat a few high protein treats (like freeze-dried liver or chicken) to complete the “eat” part of the cat mantra.

Once your kitty is done eating, they will likely groom for a while and sleep. If your cat displays a lot of nocturnal behaviors, like yowling or scratching the door to the bedroom, try doing the play and feed right before you go to bed. This will encourage the cat to groom and sleep while you are sleeping.

What about during the day? Can I do anything for when I’m not home?

Absolutely! Invest in a good quality scratching post tower and place this tower by the window to give your cat a view of the birds or bugs outside. If you can, try adding a few different pieces of cat furniture to give your cat a few options. Also, consider investing in a puzzle ball or interactive feeder and feed the cat right as you are leaving for work so they have an activity to fill part of the day. Providing a variety of safe cat toys can also give your feline friend a way to amuse themselves while you are at work.

Do you have a great suggestion for a game to play with your cat? Does your cat have a toy they just couldn’t live without? Have you tried an interactive feeder or puzzle feeder?