

This Common Blunder Can Make Your Cat Stressed, Unhappy, and Sick

Many people have a serious misconception when it comes to cats, and when they do this (as many cat owners do), it can make their kitty very stressed and adversely affect their behavior and health. Please don't do it without taking these precautions first.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many people make the mistake of assuming two adult cats who are strangers will become good friends living under the same roof
- When forced to cohabitate, cats who are not socially compatible can become very stressed, which can have a negative effect on their behavior and health
- Felines are naturally solitary creatures, and even cats who've grown up together can lose their relationship
- The best approach to building a multi-cat household is to adopt kitten siblings or unrelated kittens who can establish a bond before they reach the age of social maturity
- It's also very important to properly introduce a new cat into your home in a way that feels non-threatening to your existing cat

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Many well-intentioned pet owners, laboring under the misconception that cats are simply small dogs, assume “the more, the merrier” when it comes to adding felines to the family. In reality, the odds are good that two unfamiliar adult cats, abruptly thrown together in the same house, will not get along — at least initially.

Unacquainted Cats Forced to Coexist Don't Always Hit It Off

According to U.K. veterinarian Dr. Sarah Heath, a certified clinical animal behaviorist, writing for the veterinary journal *dvm360*:

“Introducing cats to each other abruptly can be very stressful if they are not socially compatible. While physical confrontation may not be seen, passive signs of social tension, such as social and physical withdrawal, are likely to occur.”

This may result in owners considering that there has been no problem with the introduction since there is no fur flying or blood being shed.

However cats that are expected to live close to cats with whom they are not socially compatible can suffer from chronic stress, and this can have physical health implications as well as behavioral ones.”¹

The thing is, felines aren't naturally social beings. Heath calls them “solitary survivors.” Even domesticated kitties aren't wired to seek a lot of interaction with other animals (including humans), especially strangers.

If they do choose to socialize, it's usually with close relatives (e.g., siblings), cats they've grown up with or their preferred humans. When two cats who are strangers are placed together in the same household, they usually don't come with the skills necessary to cohabitate peacefully.

The problem is exacerbated because often they are forced to live in close physical proximity to each other and need to share food bowls, litterboxes, bedding, cat perches, etc.

Felines in the wild can easily avoid cats they don't like. But inside your house, your kitties have limited options for steering clear of each other. This can set the stage for feline friction, which often takes the form of one cat stalking, chasing and showing aggression toward another cat.

Even Long-Time Feline Housemates Can Lose Their Friendship

Since cats don't “need” other cats to be happy, if you already have a feline companion, don't assume another cat will become your current cat's BFF. It's very likely cat No. 1 will not automatically welcome cat No. 2 simply because they're the same species.

In fact, No. 1 will not initially view the new kitty as part of his social group. He may at some point ... or he may not. As Heath explains:

“Anyone taking on a new cat should realize that the newcomer will be a single cat within the already existing household, like another tenant moving into a house of multiple occupancy.

The cats may tolerate each other's presence if they are introduced gradually and their need for separate core territories is respected, but wanting the resident cat to have a friend is not a valid reason for taking on a second cat.”²

Even cats who have been friendly for years, including siblings, can lose their relationship.

“Natural feline social behavior leaves little capacity for reconciliation,” says Heath, “and the fragility of feline social relationships can be distressing for owners.”³

Seemingly minor bumps in the road from a human's perspective can permanently damage the bond between cats.

For example, a cat who has been hospitalized returns home smelling not like herself, but like the veterinary clinic she just left. In response, her feline housemate no longer views his long-time friend as part of his social group.

The Best Approach When Forming a Multi-Cat Household

The very best way to build a harmonious multi-cat household is to bring home kitten siblings or unrelated young kittens who can establish a bond in their first few months of life. Getting the cats are under the same roof at a young age is key.

According to Heath, kitties reach social maturity between 2 and 3 years of age, and after that time, they become less open to interacting with new cats. No matter the circumstances of who comes home when, it's important to take steps to insure a new kitty doesn't present a perceived threat to the existing cat's territory.

- Provide the new kitty with her own food and water bowls separate from the existing cat's. The new arrival should also have her own litterbox away from the existing one and her own napping spot.

Often the easiest way to do this is to set up a spare bedroom or bathroom for the new kitty with all the essentials.

- Heath and other feline behavior experts recommend that cats who are cohabitating for the first time not be allowed to see each other for a few days or even a few weeks, to help cat No. 1 get used to the new cat's scent in what he considers his territory before they actually meet.
- Forcing an introduction is an absolute no-no, as is offering food or treats as an enticement to get the cats physically closer to each other. Remember, kitties prefer to dine alone. To your cats, eating with another cat in close proximity is stressful.
- Consider using natural products like those from Bach Flower Remedies or Spirit Essences to help your cats manage stressful feelings and events in their lives. Also talk to your holistic veterinarian about homeopathic remedies that fit each cat's personality and symptom pattern to help reduce emotional responses.
- Also consider using Feliway, a pheromone product, to reduce stress levels and ease tensions between your cats. Many people report great success using the Feliway diffuser in their multi-cat homes.

Keep in mind your goal in introducing the cats is to simply help them learn to live peacefully together. If they wind up friends, that's wonderful, but if it happens it will be on their terms, not yours!

Additional Suggestions — Environmental Enrichment

There are a number of things you can do to relieve stress all around for the kitties in your household:

- Offer lots of scratching surfaces for your cats — one for each cat at a minimum. Kitties scratch not only to sharpen their claws, but also to stretch and to "mark" territory. There should be both vertical and horizontal surfaces, as many cats prefer one or the other. Also consider experimenting with different textured surfaces that offer a bit of variety.
- Make sure each of your cats has an individual, out-of-the-way resting spot. It could be the top of a cat tree or a crate (with the door left open), or a little comfy spot on a closet shelf. If you notice one of your cats likes to hide or nap in a certain spot, consider outfitting the area with a soft cat bed or blanket. It's extremely important that each of your kitties has at least one private area he can retreat to.
- Provide lots of toys that appeal to your cats' prey instinct, and make sure to include interactive toys that you can play with, with your cat. Also consider building or investing in a "catio," which is an outdoor enclosure that allows kitties to get all the benefits of being outdoors, while keeping them safe from harm.

- Consider providing multiple perches for your cats at eye level or higher. Many cats are drawn to high roosts because they feel safe from predators and can keep an eye on activities and intruders at ground level.

You can provide access to high spaces in your home such as high closet shelves or plant ledges. Alternatively, you can buy traditional cat furniture like cat trees or you can get creative and design your own custom kitty perches. Try to provide at least a perch or two near windows so your cats can bird watch and keep an eye on neighborhood activities.

Finally, offer your kitties a fresh, balanced and species-appropriate diet, and make sure they get adequate exercise. Many housecats today don't get the physical activity they need to be optimally healthy. Under-exercised, under-stimulated cats can accumulate pent-up energy that takes the form of hostility toward other felines in the household.

Sources and References

^{1, 2} [dvm360, April 28, 2020](#)

³ [dvm360, February 17, 2026](#)
