

CONFLICT BEHAVIOR IN CATS COMPULSIVE DISORDERS (CD)

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Compulsive behavior occurs in most species, including cats and humans. These disorders have been recognized in people for some time, but the appreciation of their occurrence in companion animals is relatively recent. At this time, little information is available about the cause, prevention, and treatment of these disorders in any species.

Compulsive Disorders in cats are sequences of behavior that are repetitive, constant in form and orientation, and which do not serve an obvious purpose. These disorders are normal behaviors like grooming, eating, or movement, but are performed out of context. Common grooming stereotypies include excessive licking of the coat and chewing the hair (psychogenic dermatitis), exaggerated licking motions, and chewing the claws. Often, cats perform behaviors derived from hunting activities, such as batting the air with a front paw, or attacking and chewing the tip of their tail, as conflict behaviors. Unpredictable aggression when being petted, and sudden fits of running and hiding to escape are also common manifestations of conflict in cats.

Compulsive Disorders in cats is usually accompanied by periodic agitation, dilated pupils with a glazed expression on the face, and a skin ripple down the back. Compulsive Disorders become a problem when they prevent the animal from performing more appropriate behaviors, or when they result in self-mutilation.

Compulsive Disorders is a manifestation of conflict, which can arise from environment induced stress or inconsistent interaction between the owner and the cat. Some C.D. behavior may become conditioned. There is some evidence that there may be an inherited predisposition for performing stereotypies. Compulsive Disorders often develop in response to a specific situation, but then may become generalized to any situation in which the animal experiences a conscious or subconscious conflict. Once the behavior becomes "fixed", the pathways in the brain which control the behavior are sensitized, so that the animal follows the C.D. sequence of behaviors whenever it gets excited or in a state of anxiety.

It has been suggested that Compulsive Disorders are the animal's way of coping with a stressful situation. They are commonly seen when the animal is anxious. However, it is probably more appropriate to think of C.D. as a clinical manifestation of an environmentally induced disorder of the nervous system. It is known that brain chemistry is altered in affected animals. It is unlikely that the performance of stereotypic behavior is of any benefit to the animal.

TREATMENT OF COMPULSIVE DISORDERS

1. IDENTIFY THE CONFLICT

This is the most important step in treating Compulsive Disorders. It is important to identify when, and in what situation, the behavior occurred for the first time, and under what circumstances it is currently performed.

Cats are extremely sensitive to changes in the owner's schedule, separation from the owner, changes in the environment, strange cats in the yard or visiting through the window, other cats in the house, or new people in the house. Any of these situations may cause conflict for the cat, which could result in the development of a C.D.

It is not always possible to identify the conflict, and if identified, it may be difficult or impossible to remove it. In this case, you will need to desensitize the cat to the stressful situation.

2. NO DISCIPLINE

Discipline is rarely useful in cats, and when it is used it often exacerbates the cat's conflict. Discipline is frequently a contributing factor to the development of C.D. and should be completely avoided in all situations.

3. PUT THE CAT ON A REGULAR SCHEDULE

Cats are extremely sensitive to changes in routine. It is a wise idea to establish a daily routine, so the cat is fed at the same time every day. Quality time should be spent with the cat at the same time every day. Some cats enjoy petting, while others prefer playing. You are best able to determine what activity is your cat's favourite.

4. IGNORE THE CAT

Ignore the cat, particularly when it is performing the Compulsive Disorder, since attention given at this time may reinforce the unwanted behavior. Yelling at the cat, or any other reaction on your part, may reinforce the C.D. as an attention-getting activity. Ignore the cat at other times as well, except when you give it the scheduled "quality time".

5. DRUG TREATMENT

If the Compulsive Disorder has been going on for some time, removing the conflict in conjunction with the other steps in the treatment may not be enough to eliminate the problem. In these cases, temporary use of drugs is indicated to normalize the brain chemistry. Although no drugs are approved for the treatment of C.D. in cats, some success has been achieved using drugs intended for the treatment of similar disorders in humans. However, medication alone, without the behavioral modification techniques outlined above, is ineffective.

6. DISTRACTION

If necessary, clap your hands or interrupt the Compulsive Disorder by some means such as a whistle, as frequently as you can. Interrupting the C.D. as often as possible when combined with other methods of treatment may improve the rate of success.

Although you cannot always eliminate the Compulsive Disorder, the treatment outlined above is designed to at least reduce the incidence of the unwanted activity. To be effective, all phases of the program must be followed simultaneously and consistently. We are here to help in any way we can, so please call if you have any problems or questions.