



How Sound Can Help Your Cat Live a Better Life: The ZenCat Sound Protocol

While we love to think of our cats as tiny tigers, hunters – top of the food chain little beasties – the truth is they are also prey to larger meat-eaters. And no matter how domesticated we try to make them, their predator-prey inner selves still inform how they interact with the world. This is why your cat loves to bite and rabbit-kick a good kicker toy, but will leap in fear if a cucumber sneaks up behind him (it was a Tik Tok/YouTube meme a few years ago that everyone thought was funny, unless you understood that the cat was actually scared to death of the wily, sneaky cucumber.)

While some cats, whether through selective breeding, or a lack of trauma in their lives, are able to maintain calm during their interactions with humans, other cats live in a glass cage of emotion, where everything from the trash truck, to house guests, to yes, even you, represents a potential threat. Maybe not all the time, but enough of the time that that lack of trust may cause a rift in your relationship.

When a kitty is overly fearful, the basis of that overriding fear is an overactive fight or flight response. Rather than just responding appropriately to an actual threat, the cat finds too many threatening things in his environment, and may spend most of his day in fight or flight mode. Control over the fight or flight response is a function of the sympathetic nervous system, and when a cat is more fearful than necessary for her circumstances, it means her sympathetic nervous system is being triggered unnecessarily. This cat can live in a calmer state, if we can help her calm her sympathetic nervous system in favor of activation of the parasympathetic nervous system – which is in charge of “rest and digest.”

The primary controller of which part of the autonomic nervous system gets triggered is the vagus nerve. This nerve, which is made up of two main branches, works like a surveillance system of the environment, with the dorsal vagal nerve running along the trunk and all the way to the last parts of the digestive system, allowing access to the ability to shut down unnecessary processes during survival mode, and the ventral vagal, which innervates the muscles of the face, and allows access to higher brain functions. Polyvagal Theory tells us that the dorsal vagal is the older part of the system and designed for survival, while the ventral vagal developed in mammals allowing for social interaction.

It turns out that you can encourage ventral vagal stimulation, and in turn access the calmer, happier, less fearful parasympathetic state, through sound. You have experienced it yourself when you’ve listened to beautiful music that made you feel happy and relaxed, versus construction noise, a screaming child, or a jet engine, that made you feel tense and irritable. The difference between sounds that are soothing and sounds that are irritating is actually the frequency of the sound waves: soothing sounds

fall into the middle frequency range (like a lullaby, or soothing mother's voice, or purring), and triggering sounds fall outside of those mid-range frequencies – the sounds at the high and low ends of hearing (like the sound of hungry kittens, cats fighting, or that construction noise.)

The ZenCat Sound Protocol (or ZSP) takes advantage of this by restructuring classical and spa music using an algorithm that removes the highest and lowest frequencies, and leaves just the soothing, mid-range frequencies to trigger that ventral vagal parasympathetic response. (Studies have already shown that cats respond most positively to classical music – ZSP just makes it even better.) By using this sound in a therapeutic way, you can help your cat retrain his nervous system to a more balanced state: we don't want to eliminate the sympathetic response or survival instinct, we just want it to be triggered only when there is an actual threat, and not during normal, everyday activities. (How this works on the physical level actually has to do with how the ear interprets the sound; ZSP retrains the ear to hear the soothing sounds preferentially over the scary or irritating sounds.)

The protocol is very simple, and involves playing the ZSP music for your cat from your phone, via your phone's speaker, or a connected Bluetooth speaker, in daily 30-minute increments, spread over one to three months. The therapy is completely safe and non-invasive, and may be repeated, as needed for kitties who are the most fearful. It can be safely combined with play therapy, and the use of other calming therapeutics, with the exception of opioids, which interfere with nervous system processing.

I started developing this protocol because I used a human version of it for myself (yes, it was originally designed for humans), and my experience has been so life-changing, that I knew I wanted to share it with my patients.

I am recruiting kitties for my upcoming study to show the benefits of ZSP, and if you'd like to have your kitties included in the study, there will be a nominal participation fee (to be determined) to cover the expenses involved in running the study, and any study paraphernalia that might be required. Please let me know that you're interested in being part of the study, and I'll let you know as soon as it's ready for testing. I anticipate that most cats will experience improved socialization and less fear-based responsiveness in early 2024.

And if you are interested in the protocol for yourself, I will be happy to refer you to my Safe and Sound Protocol (SSP) practitioner, Suzanne Finder: <https://www.mindfulsuccess.com/>

To get started, email me at: dr.phoenix@zencat.com
Or text me at: (760) 443-7241

And let's bring our kitties a new level of safety and happiness through sound.

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "P.N. Watt" followed by a stylized flourish.

Phoenix Watt, DVM