Separation Anxiety in Cats

A logo with a cat silhouette

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# What is separation anxiety?

Separation Anxiety is a stress response observed when a cat is separated from a person or people with whom they are strongly bonded. A study found around 13% of cats displayed at least one of the recognized separation anxiety-related behaviors, and the pandemic has seemingly exacerbated this figure. Research suggests cats fall into one of two attachment styles:

**1**



**Secure attachment:** a cat has low stress levels while owner is away - doesn’t overly seek attention when reunited.

**Insecure attachment:** which separation anxiety falls under — comes in several forms:

*Ambivalent* - when the cat is too attached to the owner and constantly wants to be close to them

*Avoidant* - when the cat acts more aloof or disorganized (when the cat displays a mix of both)

# Diagnosis and Signs of Illness

**2**

Cats endure separation-related problems (SRP) despite the perception that cats require less attention and aren’t impacted by human absence. Probability factors for the development of separation-related problems in cats seem consistent with those of dogs, including pet owners with long work hours, changes in schedules, frequent travel, and permanent loss of a pet or family member. **Some causes may include**:

early weaning trauma

genetics hypersensitivity

boredom disability

 geriatric, life stage change

## Signs of illness may include:

 destructive behavior (frantic scratching, chewing, etc.) excessive vocalization (howling, moaning, meowing)

 litter box issues (urine marking, eliminating outside the box)

eating too quickly loss of appetite vomiting

depression

 lethargy  aggression  overgrooming

# Treatment and Management

**3**

Comprehensive evaluation is required to properly diagnose and treat any cat. Make sure to have a thorough wellness exam with diagnostics performed by your veterinarian to rule out any medical conditions combined with a behavioral evaluation. Environmental/behavioral support may include:

**Environmental Enrichment** builds the foundation for feline well-being. Cats should express species-specific, normal behaviors and have choice in their daily activities. Hunting, foraging, and surveying their territory can be achieved and enhanced for cats with vertical climbing structures, scratching posts, food puzzles, and other toys they can hunt that are placed in weekly rotation.

**Pheromones** are chemical markers that cats emit that can reduce anxiety and promote feelings of well- being and belonging or show signs of stress. Synthetic appeasing pheromones such as bSerene and Feliway Optimum and can be added to the environment to help anxious, stressed, and fearful cats.

**Supplements** that ease anxiety such as L-tryptophan, l-theanine, and alpha-caseozepine can be added to a cat’s nutritional support plan under the guidance of a certified behaviorist, veterinarian, or nutritionist

**Olfactory stimulation** or scent work can be added with catnip, silvervine, feathers and fur toys, etc.

**DSCC** can be used to gently expose a cat to a trigger stimulus paired with a high-value reward to being the process to create a new positive emotional response, avoiding connections to exiting.

**Departure Cues** can be used to create new happy memories building up to exiting actions.

**Stationing and relaxation therapy** can be used to create a fear-free sanctuary space that offers positive, predictable human-cat social interaction through training cues.

**Cat Massage Therapy** may help to reduce stress-related behavior issues and helps to strengthen bonds

**Medications** such as Amitriptyline, Paroxetine, Sertraline, Fluoxetine and others may be necessary. Consult with your Veterinarian or Veterinary Behaviorist to discuss pharmaceutical options.

*SOURCES: AAFP and ISFM Feline Environmental Needs Guidelines,* [*https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7159185/,*](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7159185/)

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