

PROTOCOL FOR UNDERSTANDING, MANAGING AND TREATING IMPULSE CONTROL/ STATUS-RELATED AGGRESSION IN CATS

Overview of the Role for Social Systems in This Diagnosis

Cats do not have social systems that are identical to those of dogs or humans, but they still have a system where some individuals have relatively different status than others. Usually, any conflicts about controlling status occur only with other cats. Occasionally, some cats will exhibit behaviors usually seen only with cats in social contexts involving humans. This situation is similar, but likely not identical, to that seen in dogs diagnosed with impulse control aggression. This problem has been termed assertion or status-related aggression, but may be more appropriately termed feline impulse control aggression.

Patterns of Behavior Exhibited by the Cat

Some cats have been described as disliking attention or as rejecting petting (“the leave-me-alone bite”). The problem with this description is that, as is true for dogs with impulse control aggression, these cats often seek people out and monitor their behaviors. For affected cats, rejecting attention by biting is the most obvious sign of the pathology. If you watch these cats, you will usually note that the affected cat stares at you and that you often—consciously or not—avoid the cat’s stare. Some of these cats constantly block access to furniture or to pathways, like doors and hallways, in a similar way that they would block access to another cat about whom they were concerned.

Some of these cats rub everywhere a particular person has been or rub (or even spray!) the people whom they monitor and attempt to control. Some cats never display any aggressive behaviors, but may exhibit the same marking behaviors in the context of including humans and cats in the same social group. Scent marking, alone, is not sufficient to make a diagnosis of impulse control aggression. Impulse control aggression is about control or access to control of the human by the cat, and scent marking may be only one aspect of this condition.

Cats with impulse control aggression actively solicit attention by jumping into someone’s lap, and then biting if they are petted or shifted. Unlike the friendly, solicitous cat who is calm, relaxed, and attentive without being forceful when seeking attention from humans, cats with impulse control aggression are tense, forceful, vigilant, and watchful, and become more aroused and reactive as they seek and receive attention. Cats with exaggerated impulse control/status-related aggression may lie on their people, batting at them to make them settle in positions that the cat controls, and then biting the people if they do not do this, or if they move. These pathological cats are good at both passive and active control of human behavior.

This is a confusing diagnosis, especially in the developing stages, because sometimes these cats appear to enjoy petting until they reach a threshold where they become so reactive that they will savage the person attempting to cuddle them. As the condition progresses, the threshold for their reactivity lowers, and even short petting sessions may be provocative for them.

Any intense need to control others in any species is pathological.

When your cat initiates petting, she might tolerate touching if there is no manipulation like cuddling or moving. These human behaviors may be viewed by the cat as an attempt at control.

For some cats, any petting will be met with frank aggression, usually biting. Once the impulse control aggression is fully developed, these cats seldom swat with their claws first, a behavior that often accompanies most normal forms of feline antagonistic behavior. Instead, these cats become stiff, may twitch their tail, erect the hair down their back and tail, put their ears back, dilate their pupils, unsheathe and flex their claws, growl, and bite. All of these behaviors will occur in close proximity to each other, seemingly mirroring their enhanced neurochemical reactivity.

The Unique Case of the Cat’s Brain and Reactivity

The pathological need to control occurs despite—not because of—the behaviors of the human, strongly suggesting that these cats cannot read, process, or act on information about whether there is a truly contextual threat to them in social situations involving humans. Like dogs, their response to this pathological anxiety is to control and preempt any responses that they find uncertain. The form that these impulsive responses take is a result of a peculiarity of the feline brain that allows cats to remain aroused for prolonged periods of time (24 to 48 hours) and to become extremely quickly aroused. Cats have been used as a model for seizure activity in humans because the cells in the *hypothalamus*, the region responsible for triggering an initial threat or stress response, are stimulated easily and they recruit other cells, quickly making these cats extremely reactive. The same underlying mechanism may result in impulse control aggression.

As is true for dogs, anxiety-related conditions in cats become fully developed at social maturity. Cat social systems are composed of extended family groups and matrilineal systems that may promote a slightly older age for social maturity (probably between 2 and 4 years). Clients are often unable to understand why the cat “changed.” He “changed” because his brain chemistry changed as he moved through social maturity, a pattern seen in all social species studied.

Helping the Cat

The key to controlling impulse control aggression is the same for dogs and cats: You cannot allow the cat to have control, **and** you have to remove or address the need for pathological control. This is tougher than it sounds, because most of the cat’s behaviors may have been so passive that you may not have recognized these behaviors as aggressive. The tick list below provides specific guidance about how to alter these behaviors. The key to treating these cats is to provide clear, reliable, humane rule structures that ensure that interactions with humans are predictable to the cat, and safe for the human.

These cats may never be cuddly (and you would be well advised to never expect them to be so), but they can learn to

live harmoniously in the household, and will usually do well with a cat that *is* cuddly.

Finally, please remember that these cats are *potentially very dangerous*. Cats with profound impulse control/status-related aggression will become reactive when they are uncertain about social interactions where the human is not actually focusing on the cat (e.g., when the human is talking on the phone). Because affected cats become so uncertain and reactive at these times, they will bite humans without preamble, and then often run away. Affected cats behave in this way because it's the rule that they use to avoid their own anxiety and to control their own reactivity about uncertainty. If we create an alternative rule structure that specifies how and when cats will get attention in a humane way we can change their behaviors, keep ourselves safe, and create a safer and richer relationship with our cats.

Tick List for Avoiding and Treating Impulse Control Aggression in Cats

1. Avoid all situations in which you know that the cat might react inappropriately. Do not view this as “giving into the cat.” View it as a necessary and humane step to keep the cat’s brain chemistry as non-reactive as possible.
2. Be suspicious of these cats when they jump into your lap. Watch them carefully. At the first sign of any unsheathed claws, tensing of muscles, twitching of tail, movement of ears, or rippling of back, stand up and let the cat fall from your lap. Do not reach for, pick up, or push these cats from your lap. These actions by you will be treated as a confirmation by the cat that you are a threat and need to be controlled, so you will be bitten. This all happens within seconds. *If you do not think that you can monitor your cat if she jumps into your lap, do not allow her to jump into your lap.*
3. If your cat does not give a lot of warning of impending reactivity, keep with you at all times a blanket, a bottle of water, or something else that will interrupt his behavior. Whatever you choose to carry, please remember that:
 - You wish to protect yourself.
 - By interrupting your cat early in the process of becoming aggressive, he will not be able to “practice” and improve his aggressive behaviors.
 - You wish to keep the cat’s reactivity at the lowest level possible so that the cat does not stay reactive for a long period of time; in this way he will not learn how to become more reactive.
 - You do not wish to scare or threaten the cat; this will just convince him that you are a threat and not to be trusted.

Accordingly, you need to use the lowest level of “stimulus” that will stop the cat. You want him to refocus his attention and abandon the aggression. By covering your cat with a blanket, you may be able to safely put him in another, neutral room where he can calm. Only when he is calm—and this may take 24 to 48 hours—can you release your cat and calmly and patiently interact with him. Do not pet him. Talk softly to him and ensure that he is nonreactive before any of your interactions progress further. Use food and praise to reward calm cats who are lying or sitting down and not staring at you.
4. If your cat appears calm in your lap, you can give her one to two pets. You, not the cat, always have to terminate the attention and regulate the amount of attention as part of the new rule structure that will increase the predictability of your behavior and the outcome of the interaction for the cat. Do not get involved in a love-fest—you are putting yourself at risk. Cease petting your cat *before* she reacts.
5. *If you are too fearful of your cat to do the above, do not interact with her.* Do not feel guilty. Your cat will benefit from not having to interact in uncertain circumstances.
6. Use a breakaway collar and put a bell on it (Bear Bells: www.rei.com) so that you know where your cat is at all times. Monitor his movements. Do not let your cat surprise you by attacking you as you pass a doorway or come around a corner. Remember that under these conditions the cat has incomplete information and will be more reactive. If you know where the cat is you can invite him to come to you, to sit and be calm, and to accompany you calmly by using treats and praise (see the **Protocol for Deference**). If you cannot yet ask the cat to come calmly with you, carry your blanket at all times and use it to interrupt aggression and prevent injury.
7. Do not let your cat control your access to anything. Ask the cat to move from the location and come to you for a treat. If your cat will not work for treats—he may be too reactive for this—try throwing a toy that he will chase. If your cat will not move, either abandon the cat so that there is no longer any value to the cat in controlling your access to the area or, if you must have access, use a blanket, broom, cardboard box, et cetera, to gently move the cat. Do not use your hands or feet to move the cat; the cat will see these behaviors as a challenge (the broom may also be seen as a challenge) and the cat will become more reactive, not less reactive. When you consider how reactive your cat is in such situations, there may be very few circumstances where you feel you must have immediate access to the area the cat is controlling. This is a good decision because it minimizes risk to you and to the cat.
8. You can teach your cat to do tricks that require the cat to defer to you in exchange for small food rewards (tiny pieces of tinned shrimp or sardines, boiled chicken livers, shredded boiled chicken) (See the **Protocol for Deference** and the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**). Decide what you want the cat to do (e.g., lie down, or reach up and touch your hand with his paw). *If you do not feel safe teaching these behavior modification protocols and offering treats, consider clicker training your cat and rewarding his appropriate behaviors by tossing him tiny treats.* If your cat is a picky eater, keep him a little hungry by offering smaller meals so that you can practice the behavior modification exercises frequently.

If at any time your cat’s pupils dilate, her ears go back, or she shows any of the other signs discussed above, cease interaction. Wait until your cat comes to you for attention before interacting again, and ask her to sit and calm for a treat. If she again becomes reactive, move away as discussed above.
9. If your cat rubs against you and marks you, remove yourself from the situation after one to two rubs. This way you have participated in the social interaction where chemical information is exchanged, but you have not allowed your cat to become so reactive that she must control you.

10. Remember that dogs and cats do not have identical social systems. Their behaviors can differ although they may exhibit similar signals. If you are more familiar with dogs than with cats, watch your cat's specific behaviors.
11. Most of these cats are so persistent and distressed that they would benefit from anti-anxiety medication. Because of the impulsive nature of this condition and the uniquely feline pattern of recruiting many neurons quickly in reactive responses, medication may be the most humane choice. All medication should be used in addition to, not instead of, behavioral and environmental modification.
12. If you do not wish to monitor the cat, isolate him when you cannot or will not be able to work with him. This can be as simple as closing a door. Ensure that the room where the cat is enclosed has water, a litterbox, and, depending on the length of time you expect the cat to be there, some food.
13. Please remember that some cats are more aroused when in the presence of some herbs (catnip, garden mints). If your cat becomes more aroused, you will want to avoid exposure to these herbs.
14. ***Left untreated***, some of these cats can become too dangerous to keep in some households. If that is the case, very few of them can go to another, very special home. Please do not turn these cats loose on the streets.
15. ***If anyone is scratched or bitten by your cat seek competent medical help immediately. Cats have curved teeth and claws. Cat bites and scratches become infected easily and can be dangerous.***