



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY**  
OF THE UNITED STATES

## **Understanding Cat Behavior: Five Big Ideas About Cats**

### **Webinar Overview**

Many cats lose their homes because of behavior problems like inappropriate elimination, scratching, and cat-to-cat aggression. But cat behavior problems are easier to solve than we think. When we learn about our feline friends from their perspective and what happens when their needs aren't met, it becomes easier to help keep cats in their homes and out of harm's way.

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### **Five Ways Cat Behavior Counseling is Effective**

- 1. Cats are predictable:** They have specific needs which if not met will lead to various responses. Once we understand these needs and how to ensure they're met, we can begin to resolve behavior issues.
- 2. High success rate:** When done correctly, the overwhelming majority of owners will keep their cats.
- 3. Supporting clients goes a long way:** In many cases, the offering of support and empathy is nearly as valuable as the advice offered.
- 4. Minimal time expenditure / Big payoff:** It can be done over the phone and typically a 20 to 30 minute phone call with some follow up calls is enough to ensure the cat remains in the home. Compare that time expenditure to how much is spent caring for one cat in a shelter or rescue over weeks or months.
- 5. Highly replicable resource:** All you need is a phone, an advertised phone number, and training.

## The Five Big Ideas About Cats

Big Idea	This means the owner must...	If not, these behaviors may arise
<p>1. A cat's most important need is to feel safe &amp; secure in the home.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain consistency in the home</li> <li>• Incorporate changes slowly and take measures to address their cat's reaction</li> <li>• Engage cat in regular interactive play</li> <li>• Provide adequate resources enabling choice</li> <li>• Provide hiding spaces</li> <li>• Ensure adequate territory, including high places</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hissing, Spitting, Growling</li> <li>• Marking with urine and scratching to restore a familiar scent in the home</li> <li>• Inappropriate elimination</li> <li>• Hiding out of fear</li> <li>• Compulsive behaviors</li> <li>• Loss of appetite / lethargy</li> <li>• Possible aggression</li> </ul>
<p>2. A cat must be stimulated in his or her home environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in interactive play using toys like the cat dancer</li> <li>• Enrich the environment with perches for observing, Solo toys and treat balls, tunnels, paper bags, cardboard boxes to explore, and food foraging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play aggression, climbing, and scratching</li> <li>• Overactivity at night</li> <li>• Increased likelihood of darting outside home</li> <li>• Overeating, lethargy, compulsive behaviors, depression due to boredom</li> </ul>
<p>3. A cat doesn't misbehave; his behaviors are rational responses to his environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deter them from and redirect inappropriate behavior, e.g. put a stable scratching post near furniture</li> <li>• Provide suitable options for the exercising natural needs</li> <li>• Provide a safe/secure home environment to reduce stress</li> <li>• Keep them healthy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued inappropriate behavior, e.g. Inappropriate elimination, scratching, aggression</li> </ul>

## The Five Big Ideas About Cats, Continued

Big Idea	This means the owner must...	If not, these behaviors may arise
4. Cats are masters of communication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be aware of body language and stop petting before any signs of agitation such as swishing of the tail, dilation of the eyes, bristling of the hair, or sudden vocalizations</li> <li>• Pay attention to where the cat is most comfortable being pet</li> <li>• Pay attention to how the cat likes to be pet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biting or scratching</li> </ul>
5. Cats perceive the world very differently than we do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be aware that new smells, people, and other changes in the home that don't bother us can be very stressful to a cat.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many of the above behaviors due to fear and stress.</li> <li>• <i>Example:</i> A new baby in the home may cause a cat to urinate on the baby's things to replace an unfamiliar, threatening scent with her own; hiss or swat near the baby who she views as a potential threat; become very active at night because she's no longer getting adequate stimulation; or hide in the closet all day.</li> </ul>

### Additional Resources

- Cat Behavior and Retention Course [www.animalsheltering.org/cat-course](http://www.animalsheltering.org/cat-course)
- Guide to Cat Behavior Counseling [www.animalsheltering.org/catbehaviorguide](http://www.animalsheltering.org/catbehaviorguide)