

Over-Grooming

Grooming is a normal behaviour for cats. It helps them to remove parasites, maintain their coat quality, and to cleanse injuries. But grooming serves a role in a cat's stress response, as well. When a cat is motivated to perform two or more incompatible behaviors simultaneously, they may instead perform a third behavior that doesn't make sense in the context (this is called a "displacement behaviour"). For example, if your cat would normally approach you immediately but you enter the house with someone they don't know, they may be conflicted between approaching and running away. Instead, your cat may simply begin to groom themselves.

Grooming appears to calm and reassure the cat.

This may be in part because grooming releases endorphins (hormones that make cats happy). However, when a cat cannot escape or overcome the source of their stress, they may start to groom themselves too much. This can result in patches of short fur or baldness, and in extreme cases it can cause trauma to the skin.



Visit your veterinarian

If your cat is showing signs of over-grooming, your first step should be to take your cat to the veterinarian. Potential medical causes for over-grooming include parasites, hyperthyroidism, and pain, among other things. Over-grooming can only be determined to be a result of stress (also known as "psychogenic alopecia") once all the potential underlying medical causes have been ruled out. Even if the over grooming is the result of stress, the cat's skin may need to be treated for a secondary bacterial infection. If your veterinarian does determine your cat's over-grooming to be psychogenic alopecia, they may recommend behaviour medications to help manage event-based stress or chronic anxiety.

Reducing the behaviour

If no medical cause is found, there are several strategies you can use to reduce the likelihood of this behaviour.

Change in household products

Think back to the time when your cat started performing this behaviour. Had you changed any of the products you use in your home such as cat food, litter, or your laundry detergent? It is possible that your cat is having an allergic reaction. Experiment by switching back to your original product and see if the behaviour resolves itself.



Watch body language

It is crucial that you learn to identify when your cat is experiencing fear, anxiety, or stress, and respond appropriately. Signs can vary between cats, but common ones are included below. See [Feline Body Language](#) for more information!

- Large pupils
- Ears to the side/back
- Tail tucked/tight to body
- Hissing/growling/yowling
- Hair standing on end
- Lip licking (when not eating)
- Leaning away/crouching/tense body posture
- Rolling on back with feet ready to strike, or feet tucked under with paws on the ground, ready to flee

Recognize triggers and be proactive

Try to identify what things stress or frighten your cat, and do what you can to limit their exposure to them. If these things are nonessential and can be removed from your home (e.g., a Big Mouth Billy Bass), this is often easiest. For things that are unavoidable but infrequent (e.g., having a group of friends over), it is wise to provide a safe environment where they can stay until they are gone. See [The Sanctuary Room](#) for more information!

Desensitization and counter-conditioning

For triggers that are unavoidable or frequent (e.g., other pets in the home) gradually introduce them to these things in combination with something they like (e.g., treats or play). Ensure the introduction is done so slowly that your cat does not go above their threshold (i.e., they do not exhibit the behaviours indicative of fear anxiety, and stress outlined above).

Provide a regular routine

Research shows that a regular routine can reduce stress in cats¹. If cats know when to anticipate certain activities, this can reduce the anxiety caused by uncertainty over what will happen next. Ensure you provide events that are important to your cat (meals, play, training, etc.) at consistent times of day.

Enrich your home

Many cats are stressed by exposure to something that scares them, but others are stressed by boredom. Enriching your home helps to ensure a cat is provided with everything they need to exhibit their normal range of behaviours – this includes behaviours that might help them cope with fear, AND behaviours that will help them keep from getting bored. Ensure your home is equipped with opportunities for your cat to hide, perch, scratch, and play. Consider offering meals in a puzzle feeder, as well. See [Enriching Your Home](#) for more information!

Play therapy and trick training

Play is a healthy behaviour that cats love to perform. Importantly, it can help reduce their stress. Ensure you play with your cat for at least 20 minutes at a regularly scheduled time every day. Follow your cat's lead and match your playstyle to their preferences – but try to encourage activity to help maximize the stress relieving benefits of play. Consider training your cat tricks as well. Clicker training uses positive reinforcement and gives the cat a feeling of control over the interaction, which is useful in reducing stress in cats. See [Trick Training Your Cat](#) for more information!



Pheromone therapy

Feliway™ is a synthetic feline facial pheromone thought to have a calming effect on cats. There is some debate as to whether or not it works², but some owners claim that it has had a profound impact on reducing their cat's fear.

Do not punish

It is important that you do not punish this behaviour. This may reduce the likelihood your cat will exhibit warning signs and may increase the intensity of the reaction in the future.

Resources:

¹Carlstead, K., Brown, J. L., & Strawn, W. (1993). Behavioral and physiological correlates of stress in laboratory cats. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 38(2), 143-158.

²Frank, D., Beauchamp, G., & Palestrini, C. (2010). Systematic review of the use of pheromones for treatment of undesirable behavior in cats and dogs. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 236(12), 1308-1316.

