



STRUGGLING WITH STRESS

Cat behaviour expert Daniel Cummings explores how cats react to stressful situations



‘The straw that broke the camel’s back’ is a metaphor that is used to describe a build-up of multiple stressors. Some stressors may be big enough to cause an instant, observable reaction. Other stressors may be more minor than that, however, the build-up of multiple stressors will eventually lead to the person breaking and showing a big, overt stress reaction. This human-focused metaphor is almost identical to a theory that exists in the animal behaviour world called **‘trigger stacking’**.

Trigger stacking can have a big impact on cat behaviour and influence the success of how a cat may cope and behave in certain environments. However, to understand trigger stacking, it’s important to first look at stress and stressors, then consider how it all merges together when addressing your cat’s behaviour issues.

WHAT IS STRESS?

To understand trigger stacking, we first need to understand stress. The word stress can vary in its meaning or connotations; in most instances within cat behaviour and welfare it is used to describe a biological or physiological response. Currently, leading texts in the field of animal behaviour consider that stress is defined and identified by the under-lying emotions that elicit a stress response. While emotions themselves are immeasurable, they can be clear from the outward behaviours the cat is showing. Behaviours which, by definition, are measurable responses to stimuli.





EMOTIONS AND STRESS

It is thought that cats feel emotions or are motivated by feelings of joy, relief, fear, anxiety and frustration; depression is also considered to be an emotion felt by cats. Fear, anxiety and frustration are identified as emotions that elicit a stress response. Therefore, when a cat feels fearful, anxious or frustrated, regardless of the length of time, they would be considered to be feeling stressed.

There are biological changes associated with stress, such as the release of the stress hormone cortisol into the bloodstream, along with adrenaline. This results from the automatic nervous system taking over 'control' and can lead to the acute stress response commonly known as 'flight or fight'. When a cat encounters something stressful, they may also freeze or show displacement behaviours, such as grooming or scratching. Not every stressor that a cat encounters will lead them to show a big acute stress response, however, just because there is no observable behaviour, does not mean that the cat was not stressed, and changes could have happened internally.

TRIGGER STACKING

The idea that cats can have stressors that cause different 'levels' of stress contribute to trigger stacking. A cat can encounter a low-level trigger eg someone shouting or seeing a neighbour cat, and it isn't enough to trigger an observable response. However, internally there is still a stress response ie there has been that release of cortisol and adrenaline, just not enough of it to trigger the cat into overt action.

Therefore, if a cat encounters a primary stressor earlier in the day, and then a secondary stressor later on, when encountering that secondary stressor their response to that may be affected by the previous stress response. If enough small stressors 'stack up', it is the same as one big stressor that tips the cat over the threshold and we will often see a big stress response. >





REAL WORLD SCENARIOS

A particular cat may find being stroked a little stressful ie they tolerate it but don't enjoy it. The cat may tolerate the strokes and show only a minimal stress response. After a little while they may avoid or show aggressive-type behaviours. If on New Year's Eve, a bunch of fireworks were let off near the house, this may cause a stress response from the cat, although not necessarily an observable response. Later that evening, when someone tries to stroke the cat, they may show a heightened stress response and really intense fear-based aggression. In this scenario, although the stroking is no different to what usually happens, because this minorly stressful experience came on top of a previous stressful experience, the cat's stress was trigger-stacked and the cat was pushed over the threshold.

Another scenario could be where you have a cat living in a household with another pet eg a dog or another cat. There may be underlying stress caused by sharing the same space. The owner may think that the situation is manageable because there are no overt behaviours being shown but something could easily cause the cat to trigger stack, for example, loud inclement weather, DIY work next door or even a visitor. This added stressor may cause the cat, who had previously looked to be tolerating the other animal, to show different behaviours towards them. The cat may show fear-based aggression or simply flee from the other animal the next time they see them, following the additional stressor. This is why it is always important to assess a cat's relationship with other animals through the presence of positive behaviours rather than the absence of strained behaviours. If you are simply not seeing strained behaviours, you don't know if there is low-level stress bubbling under the surface, whereas if you see affiliative behaviours, such as grooming each other or sleeping cuddled up together, you know that they are okay together.

Finally, the classic example of a trip to the vets. Going to the vets is not one singular stressful experience for a cat, it's lots of little ones: being picked up, being confined in the carrier, travel, having a vet prod and poke them. Your cat may show a very different response to handling in the vet room than to handling they would have at home due to this build-up of stressors. Conversely to what people think, often cats that don't like handling can appear to be 'good' with vet handling, but it's likely, in fact, that the cat is experiencing high levels of stress and suppressing behaviours rather than being happy.

A CALM HOME

In conclusion, stress is cumulative so what affected your cat earlier in the day may affect your cat later in the day, or even the next day. Sudden behaviour changes or surprising behaviours may be a result of trigger stacking.

Just because something is minimally stressful to a cat, doesn't mean that it's not important to resolve. We want to avoid any possible stress for cats and if there is something bubbling under the surface, it may only take one small additional stressor to tip the cat over the threshold. **C**

You can find out more about stress on our website www.cats.org.uk/cat-behaviour