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VOCALIZATION – EXCESSIVE

Why is my cat persistently crying?

Most owner complaints about feline vocalization are either to do with the intensity and persistence of the vocalization, or the fact that it occurs at night, when family members or neighbors are trying to sleep.



Attention getting behaviors, sexual (estrus or male) behaviors, play behavior, medical problems, discomfort and aggressive displays are the most common reasons for feline vocalization. Of course, since some cats are quite active at night, it is not surprising that many owners are concerned about their cat's nighttime vocalization and activity. Some breeds, such as the Siamese are much more likely to be vocal than others.

What can be done to prevent undesirable vocalization?

Providing sufficient play and exercise during the daytime and evening may help to schedule the cat so that it sleeps through the night. For details on feline play see 'Excessive nocturnal activity in cats'. Never reward vocalization by providing food, attention, or play, when the cat vocalizes. Mild outbursts of vocalization can either be ignored or interrupted with remote punishment techniques such as a water gun, compressed air, loud verbal no, or an alarm device, but never through physical punishment.

How can excessive vocalization problems be treated?

Understanding the problem

The cause of the cat's vocalization, those stimuli that are associated with the onset of the behavior as well as all factors that might be reinforcing the behavior, must be understood. For some cats, especially those that are middle aged or elderly, veterinary examination is recommended to rule out potential medical causes of vocalization such as pain, endocrine dysfunction and hypertension. Some older cats may begin to vocalize as their senses or cognitive function begins to decline (senility). (see our handout on 'Behavior problems of older pets' for more details).

Modify the environment

If the cat can be denied exposure to the stimuli for the vocalization (e.g. the sight or sounds of other cats), or prevented from performing the behavior (e.g. keeping the cat out of the owner's bedroom at night), the problem can often be successfully resolved.

Modify the pet

The most important aspect of a correction program is to identify what may be serving to reinforce (reward) the behavior. Many owners inadvertently encourage the behavior by giving the cat something it values during vocalization. Attention, affection, play, a treat, and allowing the cat access to a desirable area (outdoors, indoors) are all forms of reinforcement. Reinforcement of even a very few of the vocalization outbursts perpetuates the behavior. Although removal of reinforcement (known as extinction) ultimately reduces or eliminates excessive vocalization, the behavior at first becomes more intense as the cat attempts to get the reward. This is known as an extinction burst.

Punishment

Physical punishment should never be utilized in cats. Not only is it ineffective at correcting most behavior problems, it can also lead to fear and anxiety of the owner, people in general or being handled and petted. Although ignoring the vocalization, so that the cat receives no reward for the behavior, is the best solution, in the long run it can be difficult to do. Punishment devices can be used to interrupt the behavior immediately and effectively. A spray of water, an ultrasonic device, an audible alarm or a quick puff of compressed air (from a computer or camera lens cleaner) is often effective at stopping the behavior, and at the same time ensuring that the cat has received no form of reward. Punishment that is not immediately effective should be discontinued. With some ingenuity, remote control devices can be used to activate punishment devices and remove the owner as the source of the punishment. Some cats might be successfully fitted with a remote citronella collar so that they can be immediately interrupted.

What can be done for cats that vocalize through the night?

For those cats that vocalize through the night, it is first necessary to try and reschedule the cat so that it stays awake and active throughout the daytime and evening. Food, play, affection and attention should be provided during the morning and evening hours, and as many activities as possible must be provided for the cat during the day (cat scratch feeders, activity centers, or perhaps even another pet). Drug therapy may also be useful for a few nights to help get the cat to adapt to the new schedule. Older cats with sensory dysfunction and geriatric cognitive decline may begin to wake more through the night and vocalize more frequently. These cases will need to be dealt with individually depending on the cat's physical health.

If the cat continues to remain awake through the night, there are two options that might be considered. The first is to lock the cat out of the bedroom by either shutting the bedroom door, or confining it to a room or crate with bedding and a litter box for elimination. If the cat is ignored it may learn to sleep through the night, or it may be able to keep itself occupied if there are sufficient toys, activities or another cat to play with. Under no situation should the owner go to the cat if it vocalizes (even to try and quiet it down) as this will reward the behavior. If the cat must be allowed access to the bedroom, inattention, and punishment devices such as an ultrasonic alarm, compressed air, or a water sprayer, can be used to decrease or eliminate the cat's desire to vocalize.



Will neutering help?

If your cat is an adult male or female and not yet neutered, then some forms of vocalization are associated with communication, especially with regard to estrus cycles and mating. Cats in estrus are particularly vocal “calling”. Neutering should help to reduce vocalization in these cats.

Neutered animals still may wish to go outside and roam. If there are other cats in the neighborhood that frequent the home territory, this may encourage your cat to vocalize. Blocking visual access, and providing “white noise” may help if you are unable to get the outdoor cats to leave your property.