

Pet stress has increased during COVID-19, bringing behavior problems

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“Pets’ world just suddenly turned upside down,” said Stephanie Borns-Weil. “And while individual dogs and cats may vary in their reactions, change in general is very challenging for most animals.” Credit: Ingimage

As the COVID-19 pandemic closes many schools for the rest of the year and confines nonessential workers and the unemployed to staying at

home, many of us are going a little stir crazy, not to mention experiencing feelings of anxiety about what the future holds.

Even the youngest elementary school kid can probably understand to some degree why what's happening is happening—and how she feels about the loss of her usual routine.

But [dogs](#) and cats aren't equipped to process what has happened or to guess how to adapt.

"Pets' world just suddenly turned upside down," said Stephanie Borns-Weil, V07, head of the behavior service at Cummings Veterinary Medical Center. "And while individual dogs and cats may vary in their reactions, change in general is very challenging for most animals."

Although our pets may enjoy getting to spend more time with us, the dramatic shift in their routines stresses many of them out. As a result, many people who may have dreamed of being home all day with their pets have realized that, in reality, it can be. . . challenging.

Many pets are acting needier than usual, noted Borns-Weil. This may include constantly being underfoot, relentlessly nosing us to pet them, or barking incessantly to go outside.

"A lot of it is because routines are upended, and pets have no idea how to function in the new world order," she explained. "Some of it is due to opportunity—pets have us around all the time, so why not keep begging for their next meal or sitting at the door? And much of it is that pets are looking for our attention to relieve their own stress or anxiety, and they only have one or two ways of asking us for that."

Other pandemic pet problems are behaviors that probably happened at other times, such as barking at passersby.

"Everybody and their brother are out walking their dogs or taking walks all day because that's the only exercise we can get with the gyms closed and our schedules disrupted," said Borns-Weil. "So now you may be seeing more territorial barking. When you used to experience that on the weekend, it wasn't a big deal. But when you're on a teleconference call with an important client, the constant barking becomes a big issue."

Cats in general experience stress differently than dogs, noted Borns-Weil. "Cats can be overwhelmed by having people around when they weren't expecting them, especially [young kids](#), who tend to add more noise and chaos."

Cats can express stress—as do a much smaller number of dogs—through unwelcome changes in bathroom behavior, such as urinating outside the litter box.

And while dogs are more apt to turn toward us when they're feeling stressed, cats are more prone to turn away, Borns-Weil said. "So that's something to look out for—is your cat becoming depressed and hiding all day? If your cat has the opportunity to engage with members of the family, are they avoiding them instead?"

Although none of these pet-behavior problems are insurmountable, "when we're all trapped in the house together 24/7 and have to get things done, any of these situations can put a lot of tension on the human-animal bond," said Borns-Weil.



“Cats can be overwhelmed by having people around when they weren’t expecting them, especially young kids, who tend to add more noise and chaos,” said Stephanie Borns-Weil. Credit: Depositphotos

Fortunately, there are a few strategies you can follow to get back on track.

Be patient with your pet. For all of us, all the rules have changed, said Borns-Weil. "If you feel yourself getting angry with your pet, remember that they're not trying to be naughty. Animals don't know how to be vindictive.

"They don't know our buttons—so if they push them, it's by accident. Our pets are engaging in frustrating behaviors because they don't know

what's going on and are trying to communicate an unmet need. What they're saying is, "I need more enrichment' or "I'm worried and I'm trying to get your attention."

Create and stick to a routine. The more consistent we can be with a daily routine, the clearer we are about what pets can expect during this time of change. Stick to regular meal and walk times for your pet and schedule in opportunities for social interactions such as play time and cuddling.

And be proactive about avoiding situations that may inadvertently reinforce attention-seeking behavior. For example, Borns-Weil advised, "just before you sit down in your home office, take your dog for a walk and then give him a Kong or another enrichment toy so he is otherwise occupied while you have a Zoom meeting with that important client."

Give dogs and cats some space. Pets need both quiet time and boundaries. "Being around people all day, every day, can be a lot for animals," said Borns-Weil. "To put it in human terms, they may start to feel like they're like they're always on call."

Give dogs and cats places they can escape to for a break. Whether it's a beanbag bed, open crate, or corner of the couch for your dog or a window perch or chair back for your cat, designate their favorite spot as a place where no one is allowed to bother them.

"And when your pet is in that place, don't let anyone pick them up, move them, pet them, or feed them," she said. "This will help your animal build their resilience and ability to cope with unusually high levels of [social interaction](#)."

Ensure a child-safe environment. "Parents may be used to keeping an eye on children around pets for limited periods of time," said Borns-Weil. "But with kids around in the house all day, every day, parents need

to re-visit if the home is truly a child-safe environment with respect to the pets."

Never leave babies or small children alone with an animal. Make sure there are plenty of elevated surfaces where your cat can quickly get out of reach of a child before she loses her patience. And install a gate if necessary to keep children away from the dog's feeding area and resting place to prevent common dog-bite situations.

Plan for an eventual return to normal. "If your cat is loving having you home all day, she may start to feel some separation distress when we return to real life," Borns-Weil said. Make sure to guard against that by including some time away from pets in your pandemic routine. Go for a drive or walk or otherwise engage in safe activities elsewhere that do not include pets. This will help dogs and [cats](#) retain the skills of being able to entertain themselves and enjoy their alone time.

Although the new stay-at-home normal can be tough on us all, Borns-Weil said there may be a silver lining for our pets. "I think we'll come out of this with a much deeper sense of empathy for what our animals go through when we leave them locked in a house alone all day," she said.

"Look at how hard we are all striving to maintain mental stimulation, physical activity, and social connections now that we are stuck at home all day. When we're not doing our jobs from home, we're doing puzzles, watching movies, working out in our basements, and holding online parties with our friends," she said.

"We have gotten a taste of how most pets lived when they were spending all day home alone, every day, during normal times. But they need mental stimulation, social contact, and exercise during the day to be happy, too. And I hope this universal experience will end up being good for our pets going forward."

Provided by Tufts University

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