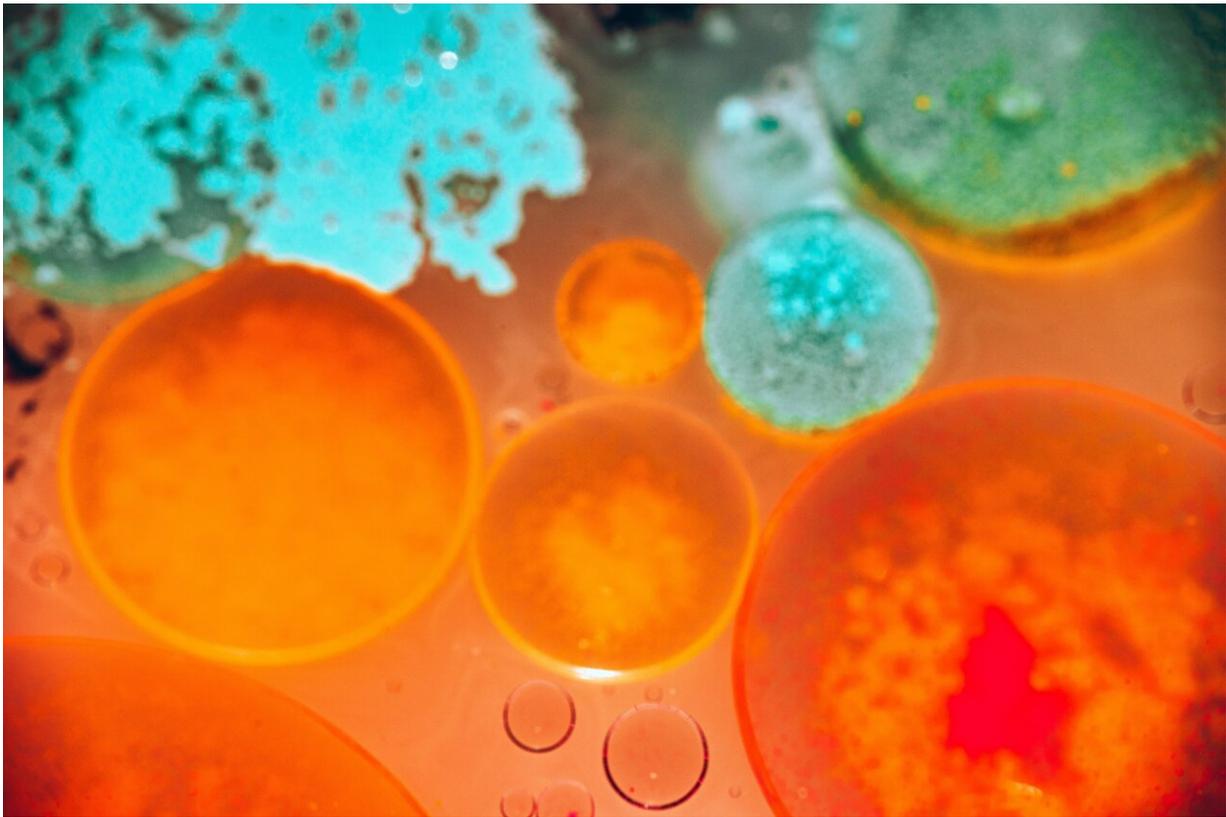# Why the pandemic made some cats sick with stress and how we can help them

September 20 2021, by Lauren Finka

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Those of us who own pets probably enjoyed their company in the depths of the pandemic. Not only are pets potentially good for our [physical health](#), they also benefit our [mental wellbeing](#). Indeed, they may have

even been a way of coping with [pandemic-fuelled](#) mental health problems.

But this is still an emerging area of research, so the impacts of pet ownership on [human health](#) aren't always [clear cut](#). Recent research suggests that having to care for a pet during the pandemic could actually have compromised our [quality of life](#)—including how satisfied we are with our health, lifestyle and relationships.

In the same way, how we interact with our pets and how we choose to manage them might inadvertently be causing them stress, too. While some family pets may have enjoyed their owners spending a lot more time with them than usual, there have been reports that some cats were less enamored with these changes to their routine—even reportedly [becoming sick](#) from the stress of their owners being home all the time. So how do these dynamics work and is there anything we pet owners can do to minimize them?

Affectionate but independent

Those of us less enamored with [domestic cats](#) might see them as a bit aloof, or cold and calculating. We might assume that cats are less interested in us or aware of our feelings [compared to dogs](#), for example.

But cats are actually capable of being highly sociable with humans and are probably picking up on a lot more than many people give them credit for. For example, cats are able to [recognize their own names](#) and are sensitive to the [emotional expressions](#) of their owners. Cats may also be negatively impacted by our [personalities](#), with anxious and depressed owners linked to greater stress in their cats.

Cats have potentially also mastered the subtle art of human manipulation within [their purrs](#) by embedding a "cry" sound within them. Scientists

think they use this sound to tap into our care-giving instincts, just like human infants do. Indeed, cats are capable of producing a broad range of [different vocalizations](#) to express themselves—though we might not necessarily [understand them](#).

Yet while cats can certainly develop [positive relationships with humans](#), they're not born with an innate desire for human company and must be [sufficiently handled](#) when young. As adults, some cats are much more sociable than others—though even friendly cats prefer people that allow them to dictate the nature of their interactions. Not stroking them too much can even increase their [levels of affection](#) and reduce aggression.

This is very different from humans, who [use touch](#) (like hugs) to strengthen our social relationships. Humans also tend to seek support from others when stressed or unwell, while cats [prefer to hide](#) and be alone.

Cats also experience greater stress when exposed to [unpredictable routines and handling](#). In general, cats value their autonomy and to be able to avoid the things they find unpleasant.

Stopping stress

The rise in some cats' stress levels during the pandemic is likely due to the disruptions to their daily peace that we've unwittingly caused. By being at home more, we have probably created a much busier, more chaotic environment than they are used to—and may be causing them more stress when we want to lavish them with attention.

Given that cats can [recognize humans emotions](#), our elevated stress levels and desire to spend more time interacting with them has likely made matters worse. Some people may have also made other changes during the pandemic—such as redecorating, having a baby or even

getting another pet.

There are many things we can do to help cats better cope and be less stressed:

- Provide cats with a predictable routine. This means keeping mealtimes, play and interactions with them to a schedule where possible.
- Give them a dedicated quiet room or area. And when they're in these areas, ensure they're never disturbed. You should also let your cat choose when they want to interact with you.
- Create an enriching indoor and outdoor environment. To help your cat feel safe, provide them with lots of hiding options and places they can get up high. Place litter trays in separate areas from food and water bowls and locate all these resources in quieter areas of the home. Provide toys, climbing frames, food puzzles and cat-friendly plants (such as cat nip) to help keep your cat physically and mentally stimulated.
- Give your cat plenty of time and space to themselves. If your cat is sleeping, resting or otherwise seems happy doing their own thing, don't be tempted to disturb them or solicit their attention.

Keeping your cat physically fit and ensuring they are in good health will help to rule out any underlying medical issues. If you think your cat could be suffering from stress then seeking professional advice from a vet and subsequently a qualified cat behavior specialist is also recommended.

With many of us starting to return to normal, our cats will be faced with further changes to their environment. But cats are most likely to cope well as you leave the house more—so long as new routines are predictable and they have plenty to keep them occupied while you're gone. In truth, many cats will likely appreciate the extra peace and quiet.