The Hiss

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I wanted to write about something that is not frequently addressed. Hissing in cats is a commonly misinterpreted behavior. Contrary to popular belief, hissing is not an aggressive behavior, nor is it generally exhibited by an aggressive cat. Hissing is a defensive gesture. It is almost always exhibited by a cat who feels victimized, antagonized or threatened in some way. Often, it is a way to avoid a physical confrontation.

In cat-cat dynamics and inter-cat aggression, the cat who hisses regularly is almost always the victim cat or the one to be chased or antagonized. (I will get to the 'grumpy' hissers a bit later on). Hissing is simply an emotional expression of discomfort, fear, or stress. A hissing kitty feels threatened, insecure, and uncomfortable.

For many of the inter-cat aggression cases I consult on, the victim cat is usually considered the problem, or 'aggressive,' by the owner. This also occurs when the kitty is hissing at the dog or a family member. The common misconception is that the kitty who hisses is "teasing" or "taunting" the other cat, dog, or person. When clients look through this faulty lens, almost any and all behavior modification they have implemented have made the behaviors much worse.

Especially with cat-cat dynamics, the kitty being hissed at is almost always the perceived threat, the antagonist or the aggressor. Prolonged direct staring, following, stalking, taking over areas the other cat may have previously used or claimed, and chasing, are all common behaviors exhibited by aggressive cats.

Hissing is simply an expression of emotion; "I'm upset," "I feel threatened," "I'm uncomfortable," or "I'm scared." Whether your kitty is hissing at veterinary staff (and unfortunately labeled as the 'mean' kitty) or whether your kitty is hissing at a newcomer to the household, your kitty is feeling vulnerable, threatened, or insecure. If you try to "correct" or punish the hiss, you will only make a bad or scary situation worse, and make your kitty more upset.

Occasionally, there are kitties who hiss to express that they dislike something (when no threat is present). These kitties will often hiss but will not direct their hissing to any particular individual. A human equivalent might be swearing when you forget or drop your car keys. These kitties are rather comical. They may hiss to express disgust or disappointment. An example would be when your kitty, wanting to enter a room, hisses after you gently try to maneuver him or her away. Or, when your kitty is outside in the

yard or on the porch, when you bring your kitty in, s/he walks away and hisses in protest. (Note: Some cats also hiss when they experience pain. For instance, a kitty with arthritis may hiss after jumping down from a perch or off a chair).

Obviously, there are many things a cat may be upset by or dislike. By being aware that your kitty who hisses is feeling afraid, threatened, or uncomfortable, it may change or modify the way you interpret your cat's behavior or inter-feline dynamics.

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Alana Stevenson can be contacted through her website AlanaStevenson.com. She provides consultations by phone and Skype.

About Author

Alana Stevenson
Alana Stevenson can be contacted through her website www.AlanaStevenson.com. She has been professionally resolving feline behavioral problems for over ten years.