



Using Aversive Conditioning to Modify Your Cat's Behavior

The first step with any behavioral issue is to take your cat to the veterinarian for a full evaluation. Cats are very stoic animals and will hide illness and injury. Sometimes our only clue that something is physically wrong is a behavioral symptom. Many behavioral modification programs can begin in conjunction with or shortly after your trip to the veterinarian.

Actions like yelling, hitting, spraying with water and shaking your cat will make your cat afraid of YOU. Picking your cat up and moving her paws up and down on the scratching post will only confuse her and possibly frighten her. The same goes for forcing your cat to sit in a litter box; chances are you will cause her to associate the litter box with getting punished and avoid the box when you are around.

The goal of aversive conditioning is to pair something unpleasant with the undesired behavior. The important thing to remember is that the unpleasant stimulus is NOT going to be a human and your cat should NEVER associate you with punishment. Timing is very important when using aversive tactics. The unpleasant experience must happen at precisely the same time as the undesired behavior or even slightly before. If the unpleasant experience happens after the undesired behavior, or too far in advance, the cat will make the wrong association.

Aversive conditioning can involve some trial and error because individual cats will react differently to stimuli. Keep in mind that aversive conditioning alone will not be effective. You must provide suitable alternative options. *See also the article on Training Your Cat Using Positive Reinforcement.* For example, if you don't want your cat scratching on your sofa you must provide a tall sturdy cat scratch tower in place of the sofa. *See also the article on Destructive Scratching.*

Texture

Most cats are sensitive to different texture under their paws. Let's say that your cat has been urine marking only one corner in your home. One aversive you might try would be to use heavy plastic carpet runner, pointed side up, covering the corner. Some cats dislike aluminum foil and others dislike sticky textures like double sided tape. Whichever aversive you use make sure it is firmly attached and not easily moved by the cat. *See also the articles on Urine Marking and Litter Box Aversion.*

Smell and Taste

Citrus smells and tastes are both usually offensive to cats. You would not use these smells to clean the litter box but you might use them to spray electrical cords.

A product called no chew wrap or Bitter Apple spray, which is specifically designed to taste bad, might also be tried on electrical cords. If using on fabric or carpet always test a small section to make sure it will not stain the material.

Surprise

Motion detected air sprays, which are designed for cats, are available to purchase. The idea behind this is that the puff of air is unexpected and might frighten a cat away from an area such as the kitchen counter. The reason this works is that the air consistently happens every single time the cat goes in that area. Another option is to place aluminum pie plates on the counter and fill them with water, beans, or pebbles. When the cat jumps up she will get wet or the plate will fall and make a loud noise. This can be effective if used consistently. However, remember that with every aversive you need to offer a better option for your cat. If you are trying to keep your cat from jumping on a counter you will need to provide a tall cat tower or window shelf in that area as the better option.

Noise

In some cases you may need to distract your cat from a potentially dangerous situation. The best option is to toss a toy near the cat to distract her or toss something loud and disruptive in the opposite corner of the room. You can also use an air horn or shaker can (soda can filled with nails, pennies, beans, or pebbles) to distract your cat but make sure your cat does not see you or she will associate the bad sounds with your presence. If you have other pets in the home use caution even with this method as some animals will redirect their fear onto the closest thing available; this could be you or your other cat.

It is essential that you are praising and rewarding your cat for good behavior in combination with negative punishment or aversive conditioning. *See also the article on Training Your Cat Using Positive Reinforcement Methods.*

If after trying these suggestions you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your cat, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.

Written by the Wayside Waifs Animal Behavior Team

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