



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor

"...Let no cat put asunder". Can a pet really ruin a relationship?

Vicky Halls investigates...

Never before have human relationships been more complicated. The divorce rate is up, the marriage rate is down and many of us are choosing careers over families. The stresses of day-to-day life are at a peak and what we probably don't need at the moment is another pressure threatening our domestic harmony.

In my role as a pet behaviour counsellor I am often privy to all the consequences of a cat's emotional upset, many of which do not directly relate to the owner/cat relationship. Sadly what I see all too often is a family or couple in crisis and often – in their words – 'on the brink of separation' as a result of conflict in their attitude towards the cat-behaving-badly situation.

Worrying behaviour

Ann and James were a typical example. Ann contacted me a few months ago having been referred by her vet. She was extremely distressed to report that her beloved cat Chester had started, for no obvious reason, to urinate and defecate in various places in the house. This had apparently been going on for several months and it soon became clear that James's approach to the problem was very different from Ann's.

As is often the way with the fairer sex, Ann felt the problem was somehow her fault; she was frustrated and upset that Chester was behaving in this way but went to great lengths to manage the situation by constant cleaning, spreading deterrents such as tinfoil and citrus peel across large expanses of carpet and generally maintaining constant vigilance for Chester's next indiscretion. James had a far more pragmatic approach to the problem. Chester was making a mess, upsetting his wife and making her fractious. After a long day at work James did not want to come home to a place full of obnoxious smells and debris. He therefore did what most men do. He looked for a solution to the situation and that was that the cat had to go. Ann and James then locked horns constantly as neither could understand the attitude of the other. Ann thought James's solution was barbaric – after all you wouldn't rehome a child – and James couldn't understand why Ann was putting up with something that was clearly upsetting both the cat and her.

The problem was further complicated by the fact that James wasn't that thrilled that some "mad cat lady" was coming along to perform some voodoo nonsense and cynically capitalise, in his opinion, on his wife's suffering. Cat psychologist, indeed!

Strong bonds

Cases like this are surprisingly common. Strong cat/owner bonds transcend the logical and work on a purely emotional level. So often people continue with situations that are untenable for all parties but feel unable to address it, let alone make the decision to say enough is enough. It seems like the ultimate rejection so they plough on regardless and sink lower and lower while the cat continues to crumble under its various stresses. To those looking on with an emotional attachment to the human rather than the cat, it must also be soul destroying. Men often become frustrated that they cannot protect their loved ones and their suggested solutions are rejected.

Another common scenario is when two cat lovers meet and decide to move in together but they both have cats, often several, that are expected to embrace the change in circumstances with equal enthusiasm. Introducing one adult cat to another is hard enough without considering the further complications of integrating five or six. Sadly, if the ultimate conclusion in these cases is that one or more have to go, who loses *their* cat or cats? This can put a strain on a relationship before it's really had a chance to get established.

Even more distressing, you meet the man or woman of your dreams and you find that your cat hates your new partner. The feeling of rejection is so strong that something has to give: ultimately, who goes? I have actually been involved in a case where the female owner decided that her cat's emotional wellbeing was more important than her relationship with her new man and he was politely but firmly asked to leave. I have always stood by a piece of advice to anyone in a similar situation: never, ever say: "it's the cat or me".

Something can be done

I visited Ann and James and devoted the first part of the consultation period to getting James on my side. I am pleased to report I wasn't nearly as mad

as he expected and he was soon keen to learn why his wife's cat had started to behave so badly. After investigating the situation and declaring that a local tom cat was probably behind Chester's reluctance to toilet outside – or in the litter tray they helpfully located right next to full length glass patio doors. The simple addition of two discreetly located trays, well away from the back of the house would probably do the trick. Oh, that all cases could be resolved so easily. I then specifically added some essential DIY tasks to give Chester an added sense of security and show James that the solution was still very much in his hands. I am delighted to report that Ann, James and Chester are now all cohabiting in a state of domestic bliss again.

I have seen so many cases over the years that I am now wholly conversant with the fact that there are always two sides to every argument and two opposing but equally well-meaning attitudes to tackling cat behaviour problems. I am willing to assist as best I can but, as always, prevention is better than cure. I will therefore step slightly outside my comfort zone and give a little advice that crosses over into the human domain.

Avoiding relationship strife

- Whatever you do, don't do *nothing* when your cat develops problem behaviour! Emotional inertia sets in with time and you will soon be powerless to act positively. As soon as it starts, seek help from your vet
- Understand that your partner is trying to help and accept that his or her offered solutions may conflict with your own
- Involve your partner and reassure them that you have taken their advice and that something is being done

- If the problem is referred to a pet behaviour counsellor, offer to involve your partner in the process but don't force the issue if they are unwilling

Joining cat families together

- Plan ahead and, ideally, join the cats on neutral territory
- If one group is moving into the established home, create an area where the new cats can settle before the introduction. This area should ideally be one where the resident cats spend little time. The two groups of cats should then be introduced gradually, firstly by scent – swap bedding – and then by sight before actual contact is possible. Introducing them by using a wood and wire frame fitted into an open doorway enables them to respond to each other without the risk of injury
- If your existing multi-cat household is tense then integrating them with another will undoubtedly cause further problems. Consider whether this is wise for them and talk through with your new partner that the groups may need to be divided to ensure their wellbeing. ●

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the FAB's Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For further information regarding these and to subscribe to Vicky's free monthly e-newsletter featuring cat behavioural articles, cats in the news, tips for cat owners and competitions, please visit her website at www.vickyhalls.net



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