

Understanding the Motivation of the Scratching Behavior

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If you make the moral decision to join the ranks of the claw conservatives, what do you do when your cat starts tearing up your furniture? Are there things you can do to circumvent the problem, or do you just have to lock your furniture away behind closed doors? The answers are yes, there are, and no, you don't have to, but to make inroads on this thorny problem, it helps to understand the motivation of the scratching behavior.

The simple explanation that furniture clawing is primarily conducted to sharpen the claws just is not true. To use an analogy, why would dragging a bunch of fishhooks across an armchair do anything to improve the sharpness of their barbs? Furniture clawing does not sharpen the claws; it conditions them by exercising muscles and helping to shuck off dead nail husks (which may be found on the ground beneath a well-used scratching site). Another reason why cats stretch up and sink their claws into furniture is that it feels good. We all enjoy a good stretch, especially after a nap. But the story doesn't end there. Scratching and clawing at various objects is also a form of visual and olfactory marking behavior. The visual marking aspect is easy to appreciate. The mark says, "Garfield was here." Remember at school when all the property was inscribed with hieroglyphics such as "This desk belongs to John Smith"? It's the same principle. Because of this, claw marks are always strategically positioned in a highly visible location, such as the arm of a couch facing the door (not the one facing the wall).

The olfactory component of scratching adds a more subtle component to this marking behavior. Scent marking to a cat is like writing to a person, conveying a message long after the sender has gone. Pheromonal odors released from scent glands in the paws leave no doubt in another feline mind as to exactly who Garfield was and probably what he was thinking when he last passed by. It's as if the visual cue were a signpost directing attention to the more detailed message, This is one explanation of why declawed cats continue to go through the motions of furniture scratching when they have no claws and no visible fruits of their labor. Another explanation for the vacuous scratching of such cats is that they are ritualistically acting out behavior that is hardwired into their neural circuits. In other words, they keep doing it even when there is no apparent reason to do so, because they feel compelled.

As scratching has a marking function, and marking is intensified by stress, the frequency of scratching should increase as tensions build, and this does indeed appear to be the case. In one situation, a cat began to scratch the edge of an open door to the living room when a new cat was introduced to the home. This territorial response mirrors what happens with urine marking, too. Taking things a little further, it should be possible for a naturalistic behavior such as scratching to be expressed compulsively. The result would be excessive and apparently pointless furniture scratching, and careful examination of the situation might reveal a sensitive individual under stress. Theoretically, the tendency to respond to stress in this way would run in families, and furniture clawing appears to do just that. It is common knowledge that to avoid owning a compulsive scratcher, you should select a kitten from parents who do not indulge in

this behavior to excess. Care should be exercised in interpreting this as evidence of a genetic tendency for anxiety, however, as learning is known to be involved when it comes to scratching. A careful analysis would have to be made before definitive conclusions could be drawn about the various contributions of nature and nurture, of temperament and learning, to the transmission of this behavior from one generation to another. It would be an interesting study and one that would point the way forward. Treatment of compulsive scratch marking (if that's what it is) would involve minimizing environmental stress such as inter-cat conflict, redirecting the scratching onto an acceptable target, and perhaps in refractory cases the judicious use of anxiety-reducing medication. This strategy reflects the influence of treatments developed for another form of compulsive marking behavior, compulsive urine marking.

Let's suppose for a moment that we are dealing not with a compulsive cat but simply with one that periodically blows off steam by shredding a couple of high-profile chairs around the house. This is not a cat for the obsessive-compulsive disorder clinic, but merely one who needs to have its energies channeled along more acceptable lines. This is where the scratching post comes in, and scratching posts do work if you know something about how to choose them and where to place them. The best teacher of the noble art of scratching is the cat's own mother, but if she isn't around or isn't trained to use a scratching post, that leaves it all up to us.

The **first rule** is that scratching posts should be tall enough for the cat to stretch up full length and arch its back as it sinks its claws in. Also, at least one post should be positioned close to your cat's normal resting area. It's typical for a cat to want to have a good clawing stretch after a decent sleep. The **second rule** is that scratching posts should be absolutely secure. Cats think there's nothing worse than having the post wobble or fall over when they're in the middle of a good stretch. The **third rule** is, the post has to be covered with the right kind of stuff. Tightly wrapped, uninteresting carpet is out, and burlap and other easily shredded things are in. Cats prefer vertically oriented fibers, as this orientation lends itself to shredding.

Many owners change a scratching post when it is old and tattered. This is dead wrong, as shredding indicate frequent use and that is exactly what you want. Half the fun cats experience from a scratching post derives from getting their claws stuck in the material and leaving wispy threads as testimony of their erstwhile presence.

More than one post is usually preferred, perhaps one for each high-traffic area of the house. Different kinds of scratching posts will provide different challenges, so owners can profitably get quite creative. A large log (with bark) is apparently lots of fun and especially good for those conditioning functions.

Scratching posts should start out in front of previously scratch-marked locations or at least in high-profile sites. It may be awkward for the humans to have to circumnavigate an assortment of burlap-wrapped posts in the center of living areas, especially at night when the lights are out, but fear not, these obstacles can be inched to more-convenient locations over time.

Sometimes a reluctant cat can be persuaded to start using a scratching post by trickery. One of the tricks is to lace with catnip the fabric bound to the post. It has been estimated that only

a third of cats experience the seductive effects of catnip (for the others, alternative olfactory attractions could be devised), but the reason for this discrepancy remains obscure. Partakers roll around in apparent ecstasy, salivating and looking for all the world like a female in heat. Some people believe that the response to catnip is sexual, but there are several strikes against this proposal. A compelling one is that catnip elicits the same heatlike behavior in both males and females. However, we now know sexual behaviors are not exclusive for one sex or the other, just more likely in a particular sex, so one cannot absolutely rule out this theory. It has also been suggested that catnip evokes a predatory response, but that interpretation has been challenged because there are responses shown by cats under the influence of catnip that are not part of the cat's normal predatory behavioral repertoire. It would seem counterproductive, for example, for a cat to salivate its way toward an unsuspecting prey, pausing occasionally to roll on its back and wriggle around on the ground. The prospective lunch may die laughing, but that would be the cat's only hope. Whatever the correct explanation for the effects of catnip, it appears to be a lot of fun for cats and may even attract them to a desired location, such as a scratching post, for instance.

While attracting your cat to the desired location for its scratching, it is important simultaneously to deter the scratching of inappropriate sites, such as your stereo speakers or the arm of your favorite chair. To do this you can take advantage of the cat's normal aversion to aluminum foil or plastic wrap by applying either material around target areas. For difficult-to-wrap locations, aversive odors, such as citrus-scented sprays, can be applied, often to good effect. The French behaviorist Dr. Pageat believes that pheromone-containing oily secretions from the glands between the cat's eyes and ears serve as an olfactory deterrent to scratching. The message sent is "Already claimed-paws off."

If all of the above fails, there is a relatively new solution to furniture scratching that works in some cases at least, the use of Soft Paws. These soft plastic caps are simply glued onto the cat's claws, rendering them less pointy and less likely to damage fabric. Some people are jubilant about the success they have had with these faux nails. They come in several colors, too, so your cat can sport a selection of fashionable colors while still being able to enjoy a good, well-anchored stretch and some undetectable scent-marking behavior. Soft Paws can be quite a surprise for an unsuspecting veterinarian.

Another reason why cats scratch furniture excessively: The behavior can be reinforced by conditioning. Getting attention for engaging in a behavior will usually increase the frequency of that behavior. A detailed account of the behavior is needed to establish where and when it occurs, and what precedes and what follows the cat's actions. Only with such attention to fine detail can effective behavior modification programs be designed. There are many imaginative and conventional solutions that can be tried before resorting to the travesty of amputation. To update an old saying, there's more than one way to cure a cat.

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