

Helping Them Behave at Home

Thwarting the Alarm Clock Cat

Taken from an article by: Dr. Nicholas Dodman; PetPlace.com

Dealing with cats that wake you up before the alarm clock is frustrating, especially when you want to sleep! Contrary to popular belief, cats are not nocturnal. They sleep at night as we do, just not for quite as long. Cats are "crepuscular," which means they are most active at dawn and dusk. This is because their ancestors' prey was most active at these times, so it made sense for them to adjust to that schedule. It's pitch black in the middle of the night, and although cats' night vision is very good, they can't see without light. Instead, they sleep. And herein lies the problem of the chronic "alarm clock" cat.

Two things combine to make this phenomenon possible:

Nature. Your cat's internal clock and crepuscular nature tell it that it's time to get up at around dawn. Depending on the time of sunrise, cats will become active sooner or later

Training. This is where the cat's owner comes in. Let's say your cat becomes an active first thing in the morning. They quickly become bored because there's nothing going on.

If you so much as look at this cat, rewarding them with your attention, you may well get more of the same in days to come. Worse still, if you assume that your cat is pacing around and scratching your furniture because they are hungry, and you get up and feed them, then you have really made a bed upon which you must lie (awake). At this stage, pretending to be asleep, yelling at the cat, rolling over, and other forms of stubborn resistance usually do not work. The cat continues the occasionally successful quest. And remember, the occasional reward is a powerful reinforcement.

Some of the things you do may even amuse and entertain the bored cat. You may, in effect, become a big squeaky toy for your cat.

Suggestions to prevent early awakenings:

- Do not respond (in any way) to your cat's dawn-time demands ... ever.
- Feed your cat twice daily on a set schedule, but do not feed first thing in the morning.
- Keep the cat occupied during the day (exercise, games, toys, bring her to your place of work, etc.)
- Feed your cat the last meal of the day at bedtime, which may help them sleep.
- Get a cat for your cat so that you are no longer the sole source of entertainment.

Dealing with the "night zoomies"

"Can someone please help me? My cat is driving me crazy! She won't let me sleep!"

Cat owners' nerves can quickly unravel as their cat/kitten draws them into sleep deprivation. You can just feel their frustration as they discuss the options they are using; shutting the bedroom door or arming themselves with squirt bottles. Some proclaim that if it doesn't stop soon, their significant other is going to make them choose between their relationship or the one they share with their cat.

In order to understand why cats are so active at night it is helpful to remember where they came from. Your cat, no matter how calmly she sits in your lap during the day shares a kinship with her wild cousins; that includes the bobcat and the puma. Just like her wild counterpart, your cat will be active late at night and early in the a.m. This is when prey is available for them. Females are the most prolific hunters and they will prowl your home for anything that moves; spiders, ants, beetles or even a small rodent, nothing is safe when it comes to a cat in high prey mode.

Since the prey drive is activated, starting in the early evening hours and continuing to morning, your cat may race across the top of your chest as you are sleeping, bounce on your pillow, run up your drapes, or simply sit at the foot of the bed and holler at you to get up and play. They could be hearing bugs in your wall, a mouse under your home. Outside cats could be setting them off as they are following instinct. They are not in your life to drive you crazy. They are being...a cat.

Play With a Purpose - according to Jackson Galaxy, Cat Behavior Consultant for www.littlebigcat.com : "In terms of resetting your cat's circadian rhythm, there is almost no more crucial element than play therapy, done at a predictable time every day. Preferably, try playing one-and-a-half to two hours right before your bedtime.

Remember the rules of cat play: Stalk, Run, Pounce, Catch, Kill, and EAT!

Give your cat a high protein meat snack right after the playtime. The cat really only needs 2 or 3 tablespoons of the snack, enough to signify the full cycle of play has been met. Then they can shift into their cat life routine which is grooming and sleeping. Of course there are more specifics to play therapy, but if you want to sleep at night, your purpose is to wear out your cat(s) before bedtime naturally, so they (and you) will sleep through the night.

Sounds simple, and really, it is as long as you stay consistent and don't give up. You may not see the results you want in a few days time, but remember, it's like a bad case of jet lag. It can take your cat ten days or longer to reset their body clock to this new "time zone." Over time, your cat will begin to sleep through the night and the stress in the household on both cat and owner will be greatly reduced. Also look into Play-n-Squeak a cat toy that has a subtle squeak of a mouse. You need to use interactive toys that keep your hands away from the claws and teeth of your hunter. Your goal is to engage this cat both physically and mentally by replicating the natural movements of a cat's prey (a mouse, a bird or a lizard). This way, very soon both of you will be able to sleep the night away in uninterrupted comfort.

Now wouldn't that be nice!