I've Adopted an Overstimulated Cat

Overstimulation in cats can manifest itself in a few different ways. There is petting aggression – when petting begins to feel irritating to the cat; and there is "busy" behavior – cats that do not settle down, pace their space, rub frequently on objects and people, and may nip.

When working with these cats it is very important to review body language and understand the signals that your cat gives when they become overstimulated. These signals may not be the same in every cat: some cats may swish their tails, others may give a cranky meow or head turn, and some may not give many clear signals at all. The irritation that cats experience from too much petting can be likened to the feeling you might get when you are being tickled for an extensive period of time. Biting or swatting is how cats communicate that they are done with the interaction.

Working with overstimulation/pet aggression

This is a cat's normal response when they feel uncomfortable with petting or handling, or when they feel that handling has gone on too long. A majority of cats exhibit overstimulation or petting aggression to some degree. However, cats vary enormously as to the extent to which they like petting or handling and how long they will tolerate it. Cats also vary greatly in the number of warning signals and their intensity, resulting in an aggressive reaction if warning signals are not seen and/or ignored.

It is very important to avoid getting your cat to the point where they are overstimulated or irritated. While you may be okay with the behavior, it is still quite stressful to your cat, and may inadvertently reinforce and increase the intensity of the behavior. Ultimately, it may leave your cat feeling less trustful of people.

If you know your cat seems to get overstimulated after five minutes of interaction, stop after four minutes. Or, if you know they don't like to be petted in a certain way or in a particular area, avoid doing so as much as possible.

Observe for signs of impending aggression. Cats always give warning signals before biting or scratching, even if they are subtle and difficult to identify at first. Common signals include tail swishing or flicking, ears flat, staring, quick head turning to watch your hand as you pet, pupil dilation, stillness or tenseness, low growl, and walking away and lying down. Note that re-directed aggression can also be a reason for biting. Pay attention to environmental triggers such as loud noises, animals and people present, other cat smells, and changes in the environment.

Withdraw attention at the first sign of any signals of overstimulation. You can do this by keeping your hands still by your sides. If your cat is upset, you may want to walk away, or if on your lap, stand up slowly and let the cat gently slide off. Wait before attempting to pet again. Some cats only take a few minutes to settle down, others can take hours, or even a day or two. Provide at least a ten-second break before attempting to interact again. Make sure that all signals of irritation have stopped. If they are still worked up, switch to playtime with quiet interactive toys such as feather toys or string. This can help relieve anxiety for the cat while still allowing you to interact.

Have realistic expectations. Biting incidents will occur less frequently over time but may never stop fully. Initially, it will be due to watching for signals of irritation, but eventually, it may change because of trust and lack of behavior reinforcement. Most cats will still exhibit this behavior to some degree for their entire lives.

Working with "busy" behavior

With "busy" cats, pet cautiously and in small amounts. If they want to pace or move away from you, let them; that may be their way of giving themselves a break from the interactions that may be overwhelming them.

These cats may also choose to rub against you or your hands to the point where they get worked up and bite, even if you are not petting them. If the cat is rubbing excessively or "twirling," try to stop the interaction by distracting the cat with a toy or moving your hands where the cat cannot access them (under your legs, fold your arms across your chest). When and if the cat has calmed down, you can try petting, but again, use caution.

Playtime with toys can be a good way to help these cats relax and relieve tension. When a cat is showing signs of irritation, try switching to toys.

Appropriate correction and response to overstimulation

Cats learn by trial and error. This is when you want to ensure consistent messages to your cat – they will learn much faster. You want to use the least amount of stimuli necessary to interrupt the bad behavior. The corrective stimuli should not be so much as to scare them.

Any type of physical punishment is detrimental to a cat and is counterproductive. Consistency is important. Setting expectations for interactions with your cat will make them feel safe and less likely to bite. Understand that it may take a little while to "train yourself" to act appropriately in these instances of aggression.

Do this:

- Use correction that causes your cat to stop aggressive behavior. Make sure to calmly withdraw from your cat.
- Use appropriate correction techniques. Use appropriate verbal corrections such as a high-pitched "OUCH" or a stern but not aggressive "NO".
- Make sure that correction techniques are not causing your cat to fear you.

Instead of this:

- React with a quick jerk away from your cat (this is how prey respond to an attack – this can trigger continuing aggression).
- Have a big reaction such as screaming and jumping (this may make your cat think you intend to attack them back, which could increase aggression).
- Use excessive correction that makes your cat run and hide or attack – use only enough correction to interrupt behavior.
- React in anger – this can cause fearfulness and stress in your cat, escalate the attack, and most certainly will not improve the behavior!
- Make "cat" noises – hissing or meowing at the cat.

This is a behavior that will be altered over time, and there is not a "quick fix."