



OVERSTIMULATED

isn't Misbehaving. IT'S OVERWHELMING.

When a cat becomes overstimulated, their nervous system is receiving more sensory, emotional, or cognitive input than it can comfortably process. The brain shifts from learning and social engagement into self-protection.



The cat isn't trying to be "bad." Aggression is a response, not a choice. It's communication that something needs to stop.



WHAT IS A CAT FEELING?

An overstimulated cat is experiencing an overloaded nervous system. Not just one emotion, but a combination of:

- 🐾 Growing discomfort
- 🐾 Frustration
- 🐾 Anxiety
- 🐾 Uncertainty
- 🐾 Hypervigilance
- 🐾 Loss of control
- 🐾 Tension
- 🐾 The need to escape

The body prepares for action: stress hormones increase, muscles tense, pupils dilate, hearing sharpens, and reaction times shorten.

1. TACTILE OVERSTIMULATION (TOUCH)

Repeated petting activates touch receptors. What starts out pleasant can quickly become irritating.



Early warning signs (please respect them!):

- Skin twitching
- Tail swishing
- Head or body turning
- Ears rotating sideways
- Increased muscle tension
- Looking toward your hand
- Walking away

If signals are ignored, the cat may:

- Grab with paws
- Bite
- Bunny kick
- Swat

This is a LAST resort to increase distance.



TYPES OF OVERSTIMULATION

Different kinds of input can push a cat over their threshold.



2. SENSORY OVERSTIMULATION



Too much sensory input can overwhelm.

- Loud voices
- Children running
- Vacuum cleaners
- Strong odors
- Barking dogs
- Construction noise
- Flashing lights
- Shelter environments



3. EMOTIONAL OVERSTIMULATION



High arousal or excitement can tip a cat over.

- Excitement before meals
- Watching birds
- Seeing another cat
- Anticipation of play
- High-energy interactions

They may bite suddenly or lose control.



4. COGNITIVE OVERLOAD



Learning takes mental effort. Too much can cause fatigue.

- Slower responses
- Increased distraction
- Less interest in food
- Walking away
- Frustration behaviors

End sessions on a success!



5. SOCIAL OVERSTIMULATION



Too many social demands can be overwhelming.

- Passed from person to person
- Multiple people petting
- Being stared at
- Constant talking
- Repeated attempts to engage



6. ENVIRONMENTAL OVERSTIMULATION



Many stressors together can overload a cat.

- Unfamiliar smells
- Strange cats
- Dogs barking
- Stainless steel noise
- Bright lighting
- Constant human traffic
- Loss of territory
- Sleep disruption

WHY DOES AGGRESSION HAPPEN?



Aggression is usually distance-increasing behavior.

The cat's brain has decided: "Something needs to stop."

Aggression is intended to:

- Stop touching
- Increase distance
- End interaction
- Remove perceived threats
- Restore a sense of control

It works. A bite almost always makes the human withdraw.

THE THRESHOLD MODEL

Every experience adds to the cat's stress "bucket."

- Loud noise
- Poor sleep
- Strange visitor
- Another cat outside
- Handling
- Medication
- Hunger
- Heat
- Pain
- ...and more



If no response → That final event.
Behavior professionals recognize the entire accumulation.

Help keep the bucket from overflowing by reducing stress and respecting early signals.

FACTORS THAT LOWER THE THRESHOLD



PAIN

Pain doesn't cause aggression, but it reduces how much stimulation a cat can tolerate.

Arthritis, dental disease, cystitis, injuries, ear infections, declaw complications, etc.



GENETICS

Some cats are naturally more sensitive or reactive than others.



EARLY EXPERIENCE

Cats with positive, varied experiences build stronger nervous system resilience.

HELPFUL FOR BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION



VARY CONTEXT

Change location, time of day, who's handling, your clothing, posture, and other variables. This helps the cat learn that touch is safe in many situations.



WATCH FOR SIGNALS

Notice subtle body language and end or adjust the session BEFORE the cat becomes overwhelmed. Progress happens BELOW the threshold.



KEEP SESSIONS SHORT & POSITIVE

End while the cat is still successful and wants more. This builds confidence and faster progress.



REDUCE OVERALL STRESS

Provide predictable routines, hiding spots, mental stimulation, appropriate outlets, and medical care.



THE BIG TAKEAWAY

Overstimulation is not a cat "snapping" or becoming mean. It's the point where the brain can no longer comfortably process what's happening.

Aggression is the last step in a progression of communication aimed at ending the situation.

Respect the signals. Stay under the threshold. That's how we build trust, not fear.