MULTI-CAT HOUSEHOLDS: IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING PROBLEM BEHAVIORS BEFORE THE FUR STARTS FLYING

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Social structure:
The social structure of the free-living domestic cat colony is matrilineal and colonies are formed when there are sufficient food resources to support a group. Colony members recognize other group members and engage in a variety of social behaviors including allorubbing, allogrooming, approaching with an elevated tail and resting in close physical proximity to one another. Similar interactions are typically observed between cats living together within a home; those behaviors may help to maintain a friendly, social group dynamic between the cats. When cats live together in a home at higher densities than what might be observed in a free-living colony, “time-sharing” of specific locations may be observed in addition to space sharing or resting in close proximity to all other household members.

However, not all cats live together amicably and it is possible to have varying levels of tension ranging from avoidance to overt aggression. Recognizing and dealing with some of the early warning signs may help to prevent further break down of the relationship or higher levels of aggression.

Problem identification:
Early warning signs may be as subtle as a lack of direct interaction between the cats and this may go unnoticed by many owners. In more obvious cases, the owners may describe spatial segregation with the cats avoiding each other or spending more time in parts of the home away from the other cat. The owners may also see active displacement of one cat from favorite resting locations by the other, or they may see one of the cats resting in such a way that they block the other cat’s access to food, water or litter box locations. Owners often interpret the lack of overt fighting as evidence that the cats are still getting along normally when that may not be the case. Behaviors such as autogrooming, oral behavior, scratching and shaking of the head may be significantly elevated above baseline in the minute following a conflict with another household cat and these behaviors may be noted by observant owners.

Normal play in cats includes mutual interaction from each of the cats and can be very active with intense physical contact. However, if all of the physical interactions are characterized by one cat chasing or stalking the other or if the “target” shows frequent hissing, swatting or avoidance behaviors, the relationship may not be as friendly as it first appeared. Owners may also describe periods of tension after situations such as one of the cats returning from a veterinary appointment or after seeing an outdoor cat through one of the home windows. It may be necessary to ask specifically about these issues in multi-cat households during routine examinations rather than waiting for clients to self-report the problem.

Intervention strategies:
When tension is suspected or observed, clinicians should recommend early intervention rather than taking the more passive approach of waiting to see whether the problem intensifies or
resolves itself. Providing cats with increased availability of resources such as food stations (not necessarily more food), water sources, litter boxes (distributed throughout the living space) or 3-dimensional resting places can all help to decrease the social pressure and decrease resource based competition between the cats.

It is also important to be sure that young, active cats have access to appropriate outlets for predatory and play behaviors to reduce the likelihood of those behavior being redirected to housemates. Using active toys, increasing the number of owner initiated play sessions, feeding with food dispensing toys and providing supervised outdoor access can all help to lessen tension between the cats.

In households with a more assertive cat, putting a belled collar on the “aggressor” may help provide the other cat with an advance warning system that allows for easier conflict avoidance. Other tools such as a “cat bib” can help to inhibit behaviors such as stalking or pouncing by some cats.

In households where the tension between the cats is already more intense, it may be helpful to physically separate the cats until they can be gradually reintroduced to each other with rotational access to a shared living space, scent transfer, or desensitization and counterconditioning sessions. Pheromone therapy such as Felifriend™ or Feliway™ can also help to reduce tension between the cats and may encourage affiliative behaviors such as bunting or facial marking.

**Prevention:**
The primary socialization window for cats is earlier than in dogs and only lasts from 2-7 weeks. Even so, continuing to expose older kittens to other unfamiliar cats in socialization classes can help to build normal social skills and reduce the potential for later intercat aggression issues. Kittens may have an easier time adapting to a new household and may be better tolerated by adult resident cats.

In one study of paired indoor cats, there were no observed differences in affiliative or aggressive behaviors based on gender. However, females were never observed to allorub other females and male/male pairs spent more time in close proximity to one another. The length of time the cats lived together was negatively correlated with the amount of observed aggression but size of the house and the weight difference between the cats was not correlated with aggression rate.

Acquiring littermate kittens may not completely prevent future issues but it does allow the kittens to acclimate to each other at a young age and may be more successful than introducing adult cats to one another. In households where a new cat was introduced to a resident cat, approximately ½ of households reported putting the cats together without an introduction period and ½ of the households also reported fighting between the cats during the introduction. Current fighting at the time of study was associated with behaviors such as scratching and biting during initial introduction, outdoor access and the owner’s perception of the first meeting as unfriendly or aggressive.

In another study, aggression between housemate cats was more likely to be initiated by male than female cats although the aggression was equally likely towards other males or towards females.
30 out of 48 cases were rated as “cured” although there was not a significant difference in the number of treatment cures based on the gender of cats involved.

Clients should be advised to introduce unfamiliar cats to one another slowly using methods such as segregation, scent transfer, allowing cats to interact through a screen door or introducing the cats with the help of confinement tools such as kennels or harness/leash combinations. In free-living environments, outsiders are generally accepted to the group after a period of time on the periphery of the group. Arranging the physical environment or household routines to accommodate this pattern may be helpful for some cats.