

Is Your Cat Keeping You Awake At Night?

We occasionally get requests for assistance when people can't sleep through the night because their cat is keeping them up. The constant game of tag all over your bed, stalking your feet for their next move to pounce, or awakening to a little fuzzy paw patting you awake on the face are just a few examples of the stories we hear. To help those of you being lucky enough have a cat like this, let's go over a few reminders.

First thing to remember is that cats are naturally nocturnal. So you have to help them become day timers and there will be a period of time to expect your cat to make this transition. Second, there will be good nights and bad nights. This is a drastic switch from what your cat has taken for 'normal' behavior and each cat takes a different amount of time to make this shift. Each time you get upset or punished her or him, this actually reinforces the behavior, although unintentionally. Consistency is your ally.

To begin, plan on participating in multiple playtimes each day. I'd recommend 20 minutes minimum and at least twice a day. Create two new vocabulary words to use. One to begin a play session, such as 'playtime!' and another to mark the end of the session, like 'all done' or 'finished'. Best results will come from having one in the morning shortly after you awake and another within an hour of going to bed.

Have a couple of different toys and games to choose from so you can provide the necessary mental stimulation as well. Toys that she can chase, jump, paw at will provide the physical exercise so that her body can rest more effectively. When you leave for the day leave hidden treats for her to find throughout the home, or a toy filled with her dry food, such as a Kong, so that she has to work at getting the food (reward) out. When you arrive home, talk to her to keep her awake and engaged so she gets positive reinforcement at the right time.

If your cat free feeds from a filled bowl all the time, think about only filling it twice a day or give her some favorite canned food only in the evening to help her feel satiated. Be careful not to over feed your cat. A lot of us use large portions of treats when only a small amount will do and get the same results.

In the evenings, when going to bed use the 'all done' word to signal to your cat that you're not going to engage with her anymore for the night. Find your cat's favorite sleeping place and name it. You can then say good night to her in her own place before retiring yourself. During the night, the hardest part will be to ignore her requests to play or talk. The first couple of times will be the hardest, but do your best. When you talk to her, scold her, or pick her up to put her on the floor, remember all of these actions work to reinforce the unwanted behavior. Eventually, she'll figure out the evenings are not the best time for attention anymore. Or if she seems to have a different sleeping pattern than you still, make sure she has quite toys to play with so not to wake you. Remember, whenever she's doing something right, like sleeping quietly on your bed, label it and praise her for being the best cat in the world.

