

Cats and the Cycle of Predation

or

The Early Morning Wake Up, Late Night Crazies or My Cat Has Turned Me into a Mouse and Wants to Play, or HUNT (me)! By Stephen Quandt

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Note: This article is written as if the cat is female, if your cat is a male just switch the gender in your head!

For cats, play is mostly a predatory behavior, it's about hunting the "mouse" killing it and then eating it. So whenever you see me use the word "hunt" below, insert the word "play" ok.



Unlike animals which are "grazers" like cows and sheep as examples, and who need to eat all day long lest they starve, Cats being predators eat and save calories in a different way. They engage in the cycle of predation in which they hunt, kill and then eat, and once they eat, nature has developed a way for them to conserve calories so they don't starve. They sleep. The switch gets turned from "on" to "off".

Sometimes we try and turn cats into grazers by free feeding them (leaving the bowl of crunchies out), and while that isn't "wrong", it's not working with their natural approach to food, activity and rest. And even if we feed them scheduled meals, typically wet food, it may be 1 or 2 "hunting expeditions" short of what they want, and/or we may not be making them "hunt" for their food, we typically just set it down and walk away. Thirdly, while many people think of cats as nocturnal, what they really are is crepuscular, which means most active at dusk and DAWN!

So what your cat is doing is partly learned behavior and partly natural. Cats, like people, engage in something we call the slot machine effect (technically the "irregular schedule of reward"). Casinos know this effect well. When a reward is random, people (and animals) will repeatedly engage in behaviors designed to elicit the reward and they will do this until they get it, feeling like the reward is just around the corner. So to a degree, her picking on you is about her not knowing when the reward is coming and trying to elicit it.



The trick to fixing this particular behavior is neither rewarding it, nor trying to discourage it *at the time it's happening*, but instead to reschedule her in a way that satisfies her needs.

Presumably when she wakes you up, you either ignore her as best as possible, or give in, or first the former and then the latter. The end result is she either gets what she wants (while waking you up) or is left unsatisfied, and you're still woken up!

So the best way to “re-program” our cat is to prevent her from waking you up in the first place. And the best way to do this is to give her the full cycle of predation about an hour before your bedtime.

The bottom line with the domestication of these great hunters is we’ve generally brought them inside, taken away most of their hunting options and wonder why they get the nighttime crazies!

If her behavior isn’t “late night oriented” but is randomly attacking you during the day, then we have to re-program her hunting instincts away from you towards toys and re-associate play/hunting with feeding.

I like to say that we can’t re-train our cats by thinking about the issue, or even by talking about the issue, we actually have to engage in training and behavioral experiments if we want to see results. This means doing a certain amount of work. So I encourage you to do “the work” and help your cat be the happiest they can be, and build the bond possible between you and them. Generally speaking, a happy cat has happy owners and if one group isn’t happy then either the other isn’t either, or they’re getting their needs met at the other’s expense!

So how do I teach my cat a new way of thinking and acting? A complete and customized behavior modification plan can make significant progress to the point of real success with either type of cat described above. I will help you do this as part of our work together.

Also please see this short companion doc **Cats and Their Place on the Scale of Predation vs. Prey:**
<https://bit.ly/CatsAndTheScaleOfPredationAndPrey>