

What Your Cat's Body Language Is Saying

What is your cat thinking? His body language may give it away.

Cats use a variety of signals (body postures, facial expressions, and vocalizations) to convey their message and avoid unwelcome confrontations. By learning how to decipher these feline postures, you can deepen the bonds of affection with your cats as well as prevent misunderstandings and potential aggression. But for many of us, cat lingo feels like a foreign language, difficult to understand and still harder to decipher. Here, animal behaviorists help us interpret kitty's cues and vocalizations.

1. Tummy Display

Feline body language is more nuanced than that of dogs, says Karen Sueda, DVM, Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists. "Part of the problem arises when people take their knowledge of dogs and apply it to cats," says Sueda. Have you ever wondered, for example, why your cat's seemingly flirtatious behavior of rolling over to expose its belly may be met with overt aggression when you try to stroke it?

When your cat is content and relaxed, she may stretch out and roll over. But in other situations, when a cat feels cornered and cannot escape, this pose -- followed by fully extended claws and sharp teeth -- may be highly defensive, indicating that she is prepared to fight, says Pam Johnson-Bennett, a Certified Animal Behavior Consultant in Nashville, Tenn.

As with other feline-human interactions, it is important to learn what your cat prefers.

2. The Fluttering Blink

When a cat greets another cat or a person with slow, languid blinks, it's communicating affection. Why? Because in the feline world, closing one's eyes in the presence of another is the ultimate sign of trust.

By blinking slowly at your cat, you are communicating that you are aware of its presence and pose no threat. So the next time your cat blinks at you, try returning the gesture.

3. Classic Halloween Pose

One of the most accurate barometers of a cat's mood is its tail.

When held high, it communicates confidence. Curled around another cat's tail or human legs, it signals friendliness. And tucked below or between the legs, it signals insecurity or anxiousness.

The upright bottle-brush tail is an unequivocal sign that your cat is feeling threatened. And when combined with the arched back, upright hair along the spine, and unsheathed claws, the stance is a dead giveaway that you should back off, Sueda says.

4. The Direct Stare

Although people can use direct eye contact to show affection, most cats find it threatening. That's why in social settings, a cat usually gravitates toward the one person in the room who is trying to ignore it.

The more fearful a cat becomes, the wider its pupils expand, says Myrna Milani, DVM, an animal behaviorist at Tipping Point Animal Behavior Consulting Services in Charlestown, N.H. When dilated, the pupils take in as much visual information as possible. This bug-eyed, saucer look signals that a cat is very frightened and wants to retreat.

In an aroused or angry cat, the pupils may become narrowed or constricted to focus more effectively on detail. But cats' eyes also respond to ambient lighting, Sueda says, so it's important to observe the body language as a whole and not single out any one element.

Once a cat realizes that he is being watched, he may stop what he is doing and assess the situation.

5. I'm Going to Get You

Even the most mild-mannered cat may retaliate if feeling threatened or aroused by too much play or petting. "Cats are stimulus-driven predators by nature," Milani says. So when they see something move (whether a mouse, cat toy, or human hand), they are hardwired to pursue it. Closer and closer, they inch forward until they reach arousal threshold. Then they pounce and kill. If the prey happens to be your hand, the wisest thing to do, Milani says, is to freeze. That stop-action will interrupt this inbred stalking pattern.

When you see these telltale warning signs: dilated pupils, low twitching tail, and flattened ears, your cat is telling you, in the only way it can, to back off. "That is not a time to get in its face and do 'the nice kitty' thing," Milani says. "And don't add to the problem by stroking it, especially if the cat is in defensive mode."

6. Audio Cues

Cats may have adapted their meows to manipulate people in order to get their needs met. "Cats don't do much meowing to other cats," says Sueda, calling meows "an attention-getting device" to express greetings, approval, demands for food, and more. Learn the nuances of your cat's vocabulary so you can detect the difference between a plea for dinner and an urgent cry for help. For instance:

- Purring usually signals contentment and may also be a comfort-seeking behavior when the cat is recovering from illness or close to death.
- High-pitched gurgling or chatting indicates friendliness.
- Growling, hissing, or spitting are emphatic warnings to stay away -- at least until the cat has calmed down.
- Caterwauling is a very loud, guttural sound that cats (especially males that have not been neutered) make when threatened by other cats. This sound is common in deaf cats.

Still, every cat is unique. "I always tell clients that nobody knows your cat better than you do," Milani says.