



# The Cat's meOW

Understanding your feline friend

**You've learned it** from self-help books, advice columns, and Dr. Phil: Communication is key to a healthy relationship. But what if your loved one is a poker-faced mystery on four legs, staring silently out the window for hours or meowing loudly as she prowls your bedroom at 5 a.m.?

For first-time cat owners, a kitty's emotions, wants, and needs can seem as inexplicable as the Great Sphinx. Cats lack the facial expressiveness of dogs, they're generally quieter, and their behaviors can be harder to interpret.

But this doesn't mean that the feline mystique is completely impenetrable. You can better understand your furry friend by paying attention to her vocalizations, body postures, and daily routines. In time, you may become so attuned to your kitty's personality and habits that you're able to detect subtle changes in her mood and even recognize health problems before physical signs of illness appear.

Your cat's vocabulary may seem limited, but you can learn to associate the sounds she makes with certain moods or desires.

The all-purpose "meow" can be a greeting, a command, an objection, or an announcement like "Here's your mouse!" Chirps and trills are how a mother cat tells her kittens to follow her, and if you have more than one cat, they will often converse with each other this way. (If your kitty chirps at you, she may want to lead you somewhere—probably to her food bowl.) A rumbling purr is usually a sign of contentment, but cats sometimes purr when they're anxious or sick to comfort themselves, like a child sucking his thumb.

Growling, hissing, and spitting indicate that your cat is annoyed, frightened, angry, or defensive. The yowl or howl is a long, drawn-out meow with a few possible meanings: The cat is scared, in pain, in search of a mate, or signaling her prey catch.

But sounds are only part of the story. "Vocalizations ... don't occur in a vacuum," says Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D., a certified applied animal behaviorist with Animal Behavior Associates in Littleton, Colo. "There's body language communications that are being sent at the same time."

For example, does your cat meow and arch her back to meet your hand when you pet her? This means she's enjoying the contact with you and inviting more. Or does she meow and shrink under your touch? She's trying to tell you to save the petting for later.

Missing these signs is common in feline-human relationships, says Hetts, especially with inexperienced cat owners. Clear signals like hissing or growling are hard to miss—or misinterpret—but much of kitty communication is more subtle. Watch your cat's eyes, ears, tail, and posture for clues to how she's feeling and what she may be trying to tell you.

The context and setting can also help you interpret ambiguous vocalizations, says John Wright, Ph.D., a certified applied animal behaviorist and psychology professor at Mercer University in Georgia. "For example, a meow in front of you in the kitchen where you're fixing the cat's food might have a different meaning than the cat coming inside from the deck and seeing you and meowing," he says. "They both may include a meow, but the actual significance to the cat may be a bit different."

After spending enough time with a new cat, you will likely begin to associate specific sounds with certain situations. Her repertoire may include the "Hello!" meow, the "Get me out of this carrier!" meow, and the "Feed me now!" meow, among others.

## CHATTY CATTYS AND STRONG, SILENT TYPES

While most dogs will bark an alert when a stranger knocks at the door, your cat is likely to keep mum. This doesn't mean she's indifferent to household comings and goings, just that her evolutionary history has adapted her for a quieter reaction.

"It would probably be more adaptive

for the cat *not* to vocalize if something scary happens,” says Wright. “It’s both predator and prey in terms of its breeding history.”

Dogs’ ancestors are pack animals, while cats descend from the African wildcat, a generally solitary creature. Because of this, the entire character of cat communication differs from that of dogs. “Cats use vocalizations much more to communicate with people than with other cats,” says Hetts. “Most of their communication [with other cats] is designed to avoid one another.”

But while some cats rarely make a peep, others won’t let you get a word in edgewise. Kittens who are handled often and are well socialized may turn into more vocal adults, says Hetts. And certain breeds, like Siameses and Abyssinians, are loquacious by nature.

Cats can also become increasingly vocal as they age, meowing loudly and fre-

quently. Two possible reasons for this, says Wright, are age-related dementia and deteriorating eyesight. A cat who feels anxious or confused may meow to seek reassurance. Hearing loss can also cause a kitty to vocalize louder than usual because she can’t determine her volume. (Any pronounced behavior change should trigger a trip to the vet to make sure your cat isn’t ill or in pain.)

Whether your cat talks all day or is a feline of few words, becoming more fluent in catspeak can enhance your relationship and give you a glimpse of life from another perspective. “Once you start to pay attention ... it’ll take on a new meaning,” says Wright.

And since domestic cats have spent thousands of years cultivating the meow to better communicate with their human friends, it’s only fair that we listen.

— *Katina Antoniadis*

## Feline Mood Decoder

Is your cat playing, meditating, or having a bad day? Here’s how you can tell

- ▶ **CONTENT:** Sitting or lying down, eyes half-closed, narrow pupils, tail mostly still, ears forward, purring. A really happy cat will often knead on a soft surface.
- ▶ **PLAYFUL:** Ears forward, tail up, whiskers forward, pupils somewhat dilated. Playing is hunting behavior; your cat may stalk her prey (a toy, an insect, you), then crouch down with her hind end slightly raised. A wiggle of the butt, then pounce! Kitty grabs her prey, bites it, wrestles it to the floor, and kicks it with her hind feet.
- ▶ **IRRITATED, OVERSTIMULATED:** Pupils dilating, ears turning back, tail twitching or waving. Intense play or prolonged petting can quickly turn to overstimulation in some cats. Your cat may growl or put her teeth on you as a warning, or she may bite or scratch.
- ▶ **NERVOUS, ANXIOUS:** Ears sideways or back, pupils dilating, tail low or tucked between legs. Your cat may flatten her body to the floor, looking for somewhere to hide.
- ▶ **FRIGHTENED, STARTLED:** Ears back and flat against head, whiskers back, fur standing on end (including puffed out tail), back arched, tail erect or low (think Halloween cat). Your cat may also yowl, growl, hiss, or spit.
- ▶ **DEFENSIVE:** Crouched position, ears back, whiskers back, tail between legs or wrapped around body, pupils dilating. A defensive kitty may lie on her back in submission with legs held close to body, and she may meow loudly, growl, hiss, and spit.
- ▶ **ANGRY, AGGRESSIVE:** Ears back, pupils very constricted, tail up or down with fur standing on end. An aggressive cat will stand over a more passive cat, staring at him and growling or yowling until the other cat gives way. Cats seem to prefer dramatic bluffs that end with one cat backing down, but this can progress to fighting if both cats are equally confident.



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