

Spay/Neuter and Behavior

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“Is Molly spayed?” “Is Max neutered?” “Is Fluffy fixed?” Unfortunately, the question is too often followed by *“Why not?”* and an exasperated, *“Don’t you know how many animals die in shelters??”*

Conversations like this can be heard regularly throughout the animal welfare community. As a member of this community—including volunteers, paid employees and advocates—I regularly have this conversation with pet owners.

I work with “animal behavior issues,” or more precisely, the behaviors that animals do naturally that people dislike. I hear a variety of statements: my dog escapes the fence; my cat doesn’t always use his litter box; the neighbor’s out-door cats are constantly fighting. All of these are behaviors of intact animals and although natural, not appealing to most pet guardians. Many of the clients I work with are not aware these are natural animal behaviors.

To encourage pet owners to spay and neuter their pets, I often introduce them to other practical reasons to fix their animals, beyond the hormones and pet overpopulation issue. Whether they are dealing with their own pets or animals around their neighborhood, I remind them that getting an animal fixed has benefits to all of us.

One practical reason many pet owners overlook for spaying or neutering their pet is dealing with problem pet behaviors. While surgery will not completely correct the negative behavior, it can give the guardian and trainer time to change the rules and environment. Surgery and recovery time can interrupt a negative behavior pattern. For example, during recovery a dog needs to remain calm and relaxed for several days to a couple of weeks. If the dog needs to acclimate to a crate, this can be a great time to use some tasty treats and toys to make the crate a fun place. (Quick training tip: if you don’t change the rules or the environment, the behavior will not magically change on its own— with or without surgery!) The increase in toys and attention can also help ease the pet parents’ feelings of guilt for the surgery.

(Yes, you know you had some guilt! No one likes to see their pet dopey on meds.)

As the pet recovers, house rules can change. If a cat jumps on the counter regularly, surgery can interrupt this behavior and allow time to work on behavior modification. During recovery, while limiting kitty’s activity, you can reward him for remaining on the floor. As he feels better, introduce a new climbing post and encourage interactive play. While this won’t eliminate the counter roaming, it’s a good start, providing multiple opportunities to reward your kitty for good behavior. Changing the rules is just another step in modifying the pet’s problem behavior. While this is not generally the sole reason to get a pet spayed or neutered, it may convince someone to get their pet fixed.



Neighbor’s pets (and those that no one claims) can also have nuisance behaviors. Community cats is a general term used for the cats seen wandering neighborhoods and behind businesses. These may be cats with homes that spend a lot of their time outside. They may have been pets that were abandoned, or their feral offspring, and may or may not be social towards humans. They typically have one thing in common: THEY REPRODUCE.



Community cats' fearful behavior toward humans greatly increases their survival in the wild. While their survival skills are necessary, their ability to reproduce is not. The additional behaviors that relate to mating can be problematic for people who live near colonies. Increased marking, howling and competition for mates can be a nuisance. If you've ever heard a cat fight or the start of one, it will give you chills. Cats can scream. LOUDLY! The solution: Trap-Neuter-Return or TNR.

TNR is the process of humanely trapping community cats, having them spayed or neutered, ear-tipped (a snip of the tip of the left ear, the universal sign an outdoor cat has been altered) vaccinated and returned to their outdoor home after recovery. All of my outdoor cats have been through this process. I was tired of seeing stray kittens hop across my deck, thanks to the unaltered cats that wander around my rural area. After talking to my neighbors, who didn't claim any of the cats, I had them fixed.

This is a necessary and practical solution in urban environments as well. It's relatively simple, although there are some cats that require a bit of creativity to trap. If outdoor cats are a nuisance and especially if they aren't, TNR is a great way to turn a negative into a positive. Besides reducing the nuisance behaviors, it will also reduce the number of cats reproducing. And in the end, isn't that one of the best reasons to take responsibility for them!

