

Fear in the face of whiskers

Christina Orieschnig looks into the very real issue of ailurophobia

Tzar Peter the Great panicked at the sight of insects. The Roman emperor Augustus hid from lightning underground. Marcel Proust spent his last three years indoors, terrified of wide, open spaces. Alfred Hitchcock was frightened by chicken eggs.

And otherwise ruthless conquerors like Alexander the Great, Julius Ceasar, Napoleon, and Hitler are said to have been scared to death of cats.

Phobias sometimes seem far-fetched, even comic. Ailurophobia – a pathological fear of cats – may seem ridiculous to cat lovers, but is decidedly a real, medical condition. And it has been plaguing sufferers across the centuries.

The fear of nimble tail-bearers

The word ailurophobia derives from the Greek 'aiélouros' (domesticated or wild cat), and 'phobia' (fear). The origin of 'aiélouros' itself is uncertain. One 12th-century source, the *Etymologicum Magnum*, claims that it is composed of 'aiólos' (quick-moving, nimble) and '-ouros' (having a tail).

Despite its ultimately uncertain etymological roots, the meaning of ailurophobia itself is well defined. It describes an abnormal loathing and pathological fear of cats.

Historical accounts and anecdotes indicate that ailurophobia has been around for millennia. Genghis Khan's fear ran so deep that he ordered any cats and dogs in the villages he conquered exterminated. Pope Gregory IX, who held the papacy between 1227 to 1241, loathed the purring fluffballs to the point of



Genghis Khan

Pope Gregory IX



declaring them embodiments of Lucifer in the *Vox in Rama*, an official papal decree, in 1233. According to contemporary accounts, Napoleon III was so terrified as to jump onto furniture and refuse to come down if he found himself in the same room as a kitty.

The term ailurophobia, however, has only been around since the early 20th century. One reason for this is that the concept of phobia itself was only introduced to medical science in 1871. That year, the psychiatrist Carl Westphal first used the term 'agoraphobia' to describe the irrational fear of open spaces. He came up with this novel diagnosis after observing three otherwise healthy, rational, professional men – all terrified of open city spaces. The phobia concept was quickly adopted and adapted by the era's physicians.

In 1905, the word 'ailurophobia' was coined in an article in the *Transactions of the Association American Physicians* describing a young woman's crippling fear of felines. The author was Silas Weir Mitchell, a renowned neurologist who notably also developed the concept of the 'phantom limb' suffered by numerous amputees. The following year, Mitchell published his findings in the widely circulated *Lady's Magazine*. With that, ailurophobia was firmly established as a medical condition in popular consciousness. It has since been featured in compendia from Hall's 1914 *Synthetic Genetic Study of Fear* to Gastpard's present-day *Psychiatry and Psychotherapy*.

A thin line: dislike and disgust, loathing and fear

"There may be only fear, terror, disgust; there may be added chilly sensations, horripilation, weakness, locked jaw, or, as in one case, fixed, open jaw, rigidity of arms, pallor, nausea, rarely vomiting, pronounced hysteric convulsions and even temporary blindness. These pass away with removal of the cat, but in a few examples leave the sufferer nervously disturbed for a day. Two report themselves as apt to have dreams of cats, what one of them calls 'cat-mares'." Such was Silas Weir Mitchell's original description of ailurophobia, which he based on questionnaires distributed among patients. To a large extent, it still holds true – though the notion of "hysteric convulsions" appears dated, to say the least, in modern medical terminology.

Sweating, racing pulse, tightness in the chest, shortness of breath, trembling, goosebumps ("horripilation", as Mitchell put it) and feelings of dizziness, agitation and nausea. These are all classic symptoms of a panic response. They also help delineate full-blown ailurophobia from a mere dislike of cats. >



Though it may be incomprehensible to cat lovers, there are countless people who simply don't appreciate our fluffy feline companions. Some will begrudge cats their independence, incensed by their fundamental individualism. Others might harbour an insurmountable aversion to having fur on clothing, claw-marks on furniture, or kitty litter tracked across their house. None of these attitudes qualify them as ailurophobes, though.

As an uncontrollable panic response, ailurophobia can seriously impact sufferers' lives. Especially with the quasi-omnipresence of cats in many places of the world, someone terrified by them constantly runs the risk of an encounter. Free-roaming domestic felines dashing across yards, indoor kitties lurking behind friends' sofas, or street moggies raiding bins on nocturnal streets. Depending on the severity of a sufferer's ailurophobia, their daily movements can be severely restricted.

Considering all of this, two questions beg asking.

Where does ailurophobia come from?

And how can it be treated?

Origins – evolution and childhood trauma?

In late 18th-century Corsica, a nurse leaves a toddler alone in the garden for just a moment – she runs back into the house to fetch something she'd forgotten. A wildcat takes advantage and leaps at the child. Some reports claim this incident was the source of Napoleon Bonaparte's alleged terror of cats.

Today, childhood trauma still figures prominently on the list of possible causes for ailurophobia. For someone who was scratched up badly as a young child, cats' sometimes unpredictable behaviour and suddenly-appearing claws might well trigger a panic response in later life. Sometimes, the response may not even be conditioned by personal experience, but by seeing violent representations of mousers in media.

Another theory, though rather more shaky, is that ailurophobia may be deeply ingrained into the human psyche due to evolutionary forces. Archaeological evidence indicates that large cats did prey on hominids for long stretches during our evolution. Radio-isotope analysis shows that between 4.2 and 1.9 million years ago, the human ancestor Australopithecus was apparently hunted by *Dinofelis* and *Megantereon*, both big, sabre-toothed cats. Many scientists, however, consider this connection tenuous – especially since people suffering from ailurophobia often do not appear scared of lions, leopards, or jaguars.





Treating ailurophobia

In most places, it is next to impossible to go through life without encountering a cat here or there. A street moggy that has cat lovers stop in their tracks, stoop, and start making kissy noises can leave an ailurophobe severely panicking in public. People experiencing such crippling restrictions in their everyday lives may well choose to seek treatment. Fortunately, there are several ways to battle ailurophobia.

One of the most common approaches is graded exposure therapy. As the name suggests, patients are gradually exposed to cats – starting with pictures, videos, and cat plushies – and, over time, learn to temper and combat their fears.

This is actually very similar to the systematic desensitisation and counter-conditioning used to help cats with specific fears: Fearful kitties are systematically and gently introduced to the things that scare them – humans, other cats, dogs, or certain environmental stimuli such as loud noises. At the same time, they are rewarded to put them at ease – with their favourite treats, for example.

In humans suffering from ailurophobia, the approach relies less on salmon pockets and more on acquiring relaxation techniques to overcome fears. By internalising these techniques, it may even become possible for patients to associate cats with a relaxation response.

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is another approach that teaches people suffering from ailurophobia to recognise thought patterns that lead to anxiety responses, and equips them with tools to prevent such responses.

In the most severe cases of ailurophobia – as with other phobias – doctors may prescribe anti-anxiety medication or even mild sedatives.

For cat lovers, spending time in the presence of feline friends is a blissful everyday experience. For many a former ailurophobe, the ability to do so is the result of a lengthy therapy process.

Dictators and the dichotomy of cats and dogs

Were Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, Hitler and Mussolini really afraid of cats? It is tempting to see a pattern here, isn't it? Conquerors and dictators, warmongers and generals – all terrified of pussycats.

In most cases, the answer is 'probably not'. Though these fun tidbits of information are repeated frequently on the internet, and even feature in some documentaries, few serious biographers of these historical figures believe in them.

Often, anecdotal evidence contradicts itself. One persistent story holds that Lord Nelson ordered 70 cats to be brought to the front lines at the battle of Waterloo, causing Napoleon to freeze in terror at the sight. The tale neglects to mention that Nelson had died almost 10 years before.

However, the fact that ailurophobia is so readily attributed to these figures may shed light on how the fear of cats is seen in popular imagination, especially in the imagination of cat lovers. Many a commentator argues that in the dichotomy between infallibly loyal, trainable dogs, and independent-minded, intractable cats, most dictators would naturally love the former and loathe the latter. In the cases of Napoleon and Hitler, their love of dogs is well-documented. The humorous image of military strongmen quivering in the face of a moggy certainly contributes to the persistent popularity of these rumours.

For modern ailurophobes, though, this bias can be a burden. Unlike other phobias such as the fear of heights, confined spaces, or even the fear of animals like spiders, dogs and snakes, ailurophobia is often not taken seriously by the friends, families, and acquaintances of those affected. For them, it is just another hurdle on the way to learning to love – or at least bear – cats. 