

Adopting a Fearful or Shy Cat

Why Are Some Cats Fearful?

Fearful behavior in cats can be caused by various factors. Insufficient exposure to humans and/or a variety of stimuli during kitten hood as well as traumatizing events in their lives can teach them to react fearfully towards people or new situations. Cats can also be genetically predisposed to being fearful.

How to Introduce a Fearful Cat to a New Home

Fearful cats usually do best in relatively quiet homes. They are often not suitable for young children as children can easily scare them with loud noises or sudden movements.

Many fearful cats slowly become more confident as they get used to their living space and daily routine. Going to a new, strange environment can throw some of these cats off and cause them to regress at first. However, if you follow the procedures outlined in this handout this should only be temporary. The amount of time it takes a cat to settle into a new home varies from case to case. Some cats may take a week; others may take months, depending on the individual personalities.

Bring your fearful cat home to a secluded room set up specifically for the cat. This "home base" provides a quiet place to adjust to new surroundings. Include a litter box, food dish and water bowl as well as a cat bed and some toys. Make sure the room is warm and comfortable. The first step is to calm the cat and help him feel secure. Your new cat will become curious about the rest of the house before you know it.

Please refer to our handout "Bringing Home Your New Cat" for more information and tips on helping a kitty acclimate to their new space.

How to Establish a Trusting Relationship

Many fearful cats bond to their caretaker(s) and make wonderful pets but retain shyness with strangers and hide when people come over.

Tips that Will Help to Bring Your New Kitty Out of Her Shell

- Always talk softly and move slowly around the cat. Avoid staring at her, since this can be perceived as a threat. It helps to get down to the cat's level when interacting with her instead of towering over her. Never push the cat to interact. If he wants to hide, we need to let him do so. We'll only reinforce fearful behavior by forcing stimulus on the cat that is scary.
- Turning a TV or radio on in the room can be helpful. It exposes them to normal household noise and can serve as white noise for any scary sounds that might come from other parts of the home. Also, leave the carrier or box that he came home in open in the room with a towel or blanket inside. This can be a great hiding spot, and it will already smell like him, which is comforting for a fearful cat.
- At first, and if the cat is very fearful, spending time in the room talking, singing or reading aloud can get them used to you being in their space. Take your laptop in the room and surf the internet for a while, this alone can help the cat to understand that you're safe. The goal is to spend as much time in the room as you can, just being there makes a huge difference for a scared kitty.
- Food can be used as a bonding tool. Spend time in the room, offering wet food or treats to your new cat. This will help the cat make a positive association between you and the food. Try a particularly smelly brand of wet cat food or traditional cat treats, it can take some time to determine what kitty likes best. You can also try very high value food treats, things like lunch meat and baby food. Be creative, the higher the value the food motivator, the quicker you may see progress. Offer this food on a spoon or tongue depressor, its best if it comes from you. If the cat won't take it from you, put it near the cat and keep trying until you can lure the cat out with the food motivator.
- Never attempt to pull the cat from his hiding place or force him to be held. This will increase his fearfulness and may even result in bites or scratches. When he is ready, he will come to you. When he consistently is coming into your space, either by luring or on his own, you can gently pet his face and cheeks. No full body pets at this time, we want slow, careful handling in a very non-invasive manner at first.
- Encourage play with interactive toys (e.g. wand toy or fishing pole type toy), but make sure that the toy you are using is not big and scary. Some cats are very play-motivated and regular play sessions can help bring them out of their shell and out of hiding. You can try play sessions concurrent with your work with food, some cats respond more to toys than food. If the cat seems fearful of the toy, take a step back and work only with food and introduce toys later on.
- Have other people work with him in this same way once he's showing signs of being comfortable with you. In this way, we can reassure him that all people are good and safe, as well as socializing him with everyone in the home. Kids should meet their new cat one at a time, having too many people in the room initially can be quite scary for the cat.

- Continue working with your cat with food and/ or toys until he's consistently coming out to you in his safe room. It's best if he's coming out on his own, as opposed to being lured out before you open the door to his room to give him access to the home. If he comes out on his own and allows some simple face/cheek pets, he could be ready to move on to the rest of the house.
- Open the door to his room and let him explore at his pace. He may be quite nervous, walking slowly and close to the ground as he explores. He may have gained enough confidence that he can move around with his body in a neutral, relaxed position. In either case, keep an eye on him. If he's too nervous, you may want to lure him back to his room with a food motivator and try again tomorrow. Take this process in steps, based on his reaction to the new stimulus. It's fine to take a step back if needed!!
- Once the cat has full access to the house, move the dishes, litter box, toys, and bed to permanent locations in the house. You may want to leave a litter box in the "safe room" for a bit to make sure that she has access to a litter box should she become frightened again and retreat to her room again. Leave the secluded room door open so your cat can hide if she wants to, but encourage your cat to be part of the family. Recognize that adjustment to a new home takes time, especially for a frightened animal. Remember to maintain the same reliable schedule of feeding, litter box cleaning, playtime and grooming
- Lavish love and attention on your new cat. Regardless of your cat's history, your care is what matters now. Keep earning your animal's trust with daily care, playtime and routine.

Patience and understanding are essential with fearful cats. They will give you plenty of love and purrs in return!