



BEHAVIOR & TRAINING



LIVING WITH A FEARFUL CAT

Some cats can be skittish, or nervous, around new people and/or new objects. Generally, cats are environmentally sensitive creatures, thus changes to a familiar environment may lead to stress. When encountering a new potentially scary person or thing, a cat's natural instinct will tell them to hide or avoid it, until it goes away. However, if cats don't have the option to leave, they may become defensive. They may hiss, growl, swat, or even attack the new person, object, or other animal out of fear and uncertainty. This behavior can escalate over time and become a habit due to stress and repetition.

Reasons Cats can be Fearful

There are many reasons for a cat to be shy or fearful. The most common reason is a **lack of socialization** from a young age. If a kitten is not safely exposed to new things before the age of 12 weeks, he/she will have an increased likelihood of reacting fearfully when exposed later in life. This is especially true if the first time encounter is abrupt and/or stressful for the cat.

Other reasons include a **genetic predisposition**, an **underlying medical issue**, or **past negative experiences**. Every cat has a different personality; some are energetic and playful while others are reserved and particular about their friends. Likewise, some cats are just born with a shy and cautious personality. It's important to know your cat and work at his/her pace and level of comfort.

If fearful behavior is new or different from how your cat has behaved in the past, then he/she could have an underlying medical issue. Always make an appointment with your veterinarian when there is any kind of behavior change to rule out health concerns.

Occasionally, if a cat has had negative experiences in the past they can be overly-cautious of new people or objects. Their experience has told them that new things could be a threat or possibly harmful to them. It's difficult to know if a cat has had past negative experiences as their reaction is often similar to cats who have not been properly socialized at a young age.

Regardless of the reason, *forcing a cat into a situation they are uncomfortable with so they can "get used to it" can be very detrimental to the cat.* It usually only confirms to the cat that their instincts were correct and this new person or object is, indeed, very scary and a threat.



BEHAVIOR & TRAINING



LIVING WITH A FEARFUL CAT, continued...

How can I help my cat be more social and less fearful?

It's important to remember that one negative experience can outweigh multiple positive experiences, so it's vital that your cat has many positive experiences with new people or new objects. Here's what you can do to help:

- ✓ Make sure you have places for your cat to hide in case he/she makes a choice to avoid a situation. However, close doors to other rooms and keep your cat in the general area of the new object or person.
- ✓ What does your cat love? Canned food? Tuna? A special toy? Use what motivates your cat to help him/her gain positive feelings about the new person or object. Play with your cat when the new person is present.
- ✓ Make sure your cat is comfortable enough (at a safe distance) to indulge in these activities. If your cat is too stressed, he/she will not eat or play no matter how tempting the treat. Try having a new person or object further away or less visible to start.
- ✓ Have the new person sit with their side to your cat. If they make eye contact, make sure it's brief and not a direct stare. (**DO NOT** force the cat to interact with the "scary" new object or person. This will only increase your cat's stress and uncertainty and may cause him/her cat to tip over into aggression.)
- ✓ Gently toss treats to your cat or place a bowl of wet food close by while the new person or object is near. Let your cat make all the choices. If he/she doesn't want to come out from under the couch, then he/she doesn't have to.
- ✓ If your cat approaches slowly or feels comfortable enough to greet the new person, do not reach out but instead drop some treats or entice your cat with the toy. If your cat engages with the new person on his/her own, then you can allow soft petting and calm, slow interactions.
- ✓ Go slowly and at the cat's pace. Each introduction is crucial to progress. Don't become discouraged and push your cat into a situation they aren't ready for. Instead, celebrate the small successes!
- ✓ Recognize that some cats prefer a select group of friends than being a social butterfly. It can take time for a cat's circle to expand, but with lots of positive encouragement and no pressure, your cat will learn to accept new people and objects over time. Accept your cat for who he/she is and remember that some cats have a predisposition to shyness.



BEHAVIOR & TRAINING



LIVING WITH A FEARFUL CAT, continued...

A couple more tips:

- ✓ Make sure your cat's environment is enriching. This means plenty of places to perch, climb, hide, and explore. Some cats prefer to watch new visitors from high above. Giving them that opportunity can help them gain confidence and ease their anxiety.
- ✓ Try using feline pheromone spray like Feliway. It's a calming and naturally soothing spray that can help ease your cat's anxiety at meeting new people or approaching new objects.
- ✓ If you cannot spend the time sitting patiently while tossing treats or playing with toy when guests arrive, place your cat in a closed room with water, a litter box, and toys. Your cat will feel less pressured and/or anxious about people entering the house if given a calm sanctuary.
- ✓ If there is the possibility of a negative interaction (you're not home, unexpected visitors, etc.) it is important to have a back-up plan in place. Have a room already set up for your cat to retreat to or have treats handy and ready to toss at any occasion!

