



Transitioning Tips for Fearful Felines

Fear in cats can be caused by various factors. Some cats are warier of new situations than others. Fear can be rooted in past negative experiences, lack of exposure to new things at a formative age, or the temperament of the cat.

Many fearful cats who make progress in a shelter environment will show increased fear immediately after adoption. Changing environments is very stressful for cats, but don't be discouraged! There are many things you can do to help your new friend to get comfortable in their new home.

Common Signs of Fear/Stress	Common Signs of Relaxation
Large pupils	Slow blinks
Tense crouched body	Settling body
Ears flattened/lowered	Tucking feet under body
Hiding/retreating	Pupils returning to normal size
Hissing	Investigating offered finger
Noise sensitivity/flinching	Eating treats/food
Puffed hair (piloerection)	Grooming
Moving with body lowered	Stretching/yawning

1. **The sanctuary transition space.** When transitioning to a new home, confine the cat to a SMALL room (bathroom, laundry room, etc.) for *at least 5-7 days*, longer if cat is not choosing to move comfortably around the space. If introduced to the entire living space at once, cats can choose their OWN sanctuary space, which may be inaccessible (ex under a bed). In choosing a bathroom or a similarly small room, you can more easily monitor, socialize, and build a positive relationship *during the transition*. Additionally, *being introduced to too large a space too quickly can lead to inappropriate litter box usage*. Make sure they have easy access to everything they need in the room (hiding spot/food/water/litter box/toys/enrichment).
2. **When they're ready, take petting slow.** Begin with cheek, chin, and head pets. These are less invasive, and therefore less scary for most kitties. Don't try and pick up the cat, force them out of a hiding spot, or try to restrain them if they want to move away.

For more information or to request behavior assistance, visit eastbayspca.org/behavior.

© 2024. This work is openly licensed via [CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

3. **Consent checks.** Instead of petting immediately, offer your hand near the cat. If they sniff/engage, proceed. If not, respect their choice and withdraw your hand. Try offering a treat or toy instead! Often fearful cats will relax some when they see that your goal is not to immediately touch them. Counterintuitively, this often leads them to allowing touch more readily. Check out our [Consent Checks handout](#) for more details!
4. **Positive associations.** Find what motivates your cat and use that to create positive associations to being around you, or in new situations/new places in the home. Some cats are motivated by food, others by play, some by both. Find out their favorite treat or gentle toy, then only offer it to them when you are socializing or helping them explore something new. Make the association that hanging out with you = something nice happens! High-value options include:
 - a. Churu/Nulo sticks or all meat baby food
 - b. Freeze dried meat treats/Greenies/Temptations
 - c. Strips of paper as toys (these are often less intimidating than larger store-bought toys)
5. **Your body language.** You can help your cat relax by giving them certain cues. Slowly blinking your eyes and then looking away is a non-threatening feline gesture. Sitting to the side is less threatening than facing the cat. Tilting your head to one side and relaxing your shoulders is a friendly gesture. Speaking softly and moving gently in their space is ideal.
6. **Gradually introduce the cat to the rest of the home under your supervision** after they've grown to trust you. *Time is your biggest ally!* Do this in stages—for example opening the bathroom to the entire house at once may not be advisable. Even if they begin confidently, they could panic and hide somewhere inaccessible. Make sure to cat-proof any new rooms first, and provide access to appropriate hiding spots. If necessary, use barriers like closed doors, exercise pens, or baby gates to direct your cat's path.