



## ARIZONA HUMANE SOCIETY

Improving the Lives of Animals Since 1957

### UNDERSTANDING THE FEARFUL CAT

*WHEN CATS FEEL THREATENED*, they usually respond in three ways to the object, person or situation they perceive as a threat: fight, flee or freeze. Some cats become so frightened they lose control of their bladder or bowels and eliminate right where they are. Each cat has her preferred way of dealing with a crisis. You'll notice that your cat probably tends to try one option first, and if that doesn't work, she's forced to try a different option. For instance, if your cat is afraid of dogs and a friend brings his dog to your home to visit, you might notice the following: first, your cat puffs out her fur to make herself look big, then hisses and spits at the dog. If the dog doesn't retreat, your cat may flee the situation, find a hiding spot, and freeze until she deems the situation safe.

Your cat may show the following behaviors when she is fearful:

- Hiding
- Aggression (spitting, hissing, growling, piloerection, swatting, biting, scratching)
- Loss of control over bladder and/or bowels
- Freezing in place

It's normal for you to want to help and comfort your cat when she's frightened. However, this isn't necessarily the best thing to do from your cat's point of view. It's normal for a cat to feel insecure or frightened in a new environment. Often, your new cat will hide for a day or two when you first bring her home. Sometimes a traumatic experience like a visit to the veterinarian, or introducing a new animal into the household, can disrupt her routine and send her under the bed for a few days.

#### What Causes Fearful Behavior?

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You'll need to closely observe your cat to determine the trigger for her fearful behavior. Keep in mind that just because you know that the person or animal approaching your cat has good intentions, doesn't mean that she feels safe. The trigger for her fearful behavior could be anything. Some common triggers are:

- A particular person
- A stranger
- Another animal
- A child
- Loud noises

#### What You Can Do

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Take the following steps to reduce your cat's anxiety and help her become more confident:

- First, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian for a thorough physical examination to rule out any medical reasons for your cat's fearful behavior. Cats don't always act sick, even when they are. Any sudden behavior change could mean that your cat is ill and should be taken seriously. Some common symptoms that your cat may be ill are aggressiveness, hiding and eliminating outside of the litter box.

- If your cat is healthy, but hiding, leave her alone. She'll come out when she's ready. To force her out of her hiding spot will only make her more fearful. Make sure she has easy access to food, water and her litter box from her hiding place. Clean the litter box and change the food and water every day so you know whether she is eating and drinking.
- Keep any contact with the fear stimulus to a minimum.
- Keep your cat's routine as regular as possible. Cats feel more confident if they know when to expect daily feeding, playing, cuddling and grooming.
- Try to desensitize your cat to the fear stimulus:
  - Determine what distance your cat can be from the fear stimulus without responding fearfully.
  - Introduce the fear stimulus at this distance while you're feeding your cat tasty treats and praising her.
  - Slowly move the fear stimulus closer as you continue to praise your cat and offer her treats.
  - If at any time during this process your cat shows fearful behavior, you've proceeded too quickly and will need to start over from the beginning. This is the most common mistake people make when desensitizing an animal, and it can be avoided by working in short sessions, paying careful attention to your cat so that you don't progress too rapidly for her.
  - You may need help from a professional animal behavior specialist with the desensitization process.

### **A Note about Aggression**

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If your cat is threatening you, another person or an animal, you should seek help from a professional animal behavior specialist. To keep everyone safe in the meantime, confine your cat to an area of the house where all interactions with her are kept to a minimum and are supervised by a responsible person. Cat bites and scratches are serious and can easily become infected. Bites should be reported to your local animal control agency so that your cat can be quarantined and watched for signs of rabies. If you can't keep your cat separated from the stimuli that brings on her aggressive behavior and you're unable to work with a professional animal behavior specialist, please consider having your cat humanely euthanized. The safety of your cat and the other animals and humans she encounters, should be your first consideration.

### **What *Not* to Do**

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- Don't punish your cat for her fearful behavior. Animals associate punishment with what they're doing at the time they're punished, so your cat is likely to associate any punishment you give her with you. This will only cause her to become fearful of you and she still won't understand why she's being punished.
- Don't force her to experience the object or situation that is causing her fear. For example, if she is afraid of a certain person, don't let that person try to pick her up and hold her. This will only make her more frightened of that person.

**For more information, please visit  
[www.azhumane.org](http://www.azhumane.org)**

*Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado  
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