

THE FEARFUL CAT

Often, we don't know the exact cause of fear for our cats. Cats can be fearful for many reasons including genetics, lack of early socialization, exposure to something scary during the developmental period or a traumatic experience. Regardless of the reason for being fearful, there are ways you can help your cat overcome it. With time, training and patience your cat will eventually learn to enjoy (or at least be ok with) the things she finds scary.

First and foremost, check in with your veterinarian to be sure that there is not a medical cause for the fearful behavior. Disease, injury, poor vision, poor hearing, thyroid imbalance, etc. can all cause a cat to behave in a fearful manner.

IS SHE AFRAID?

It is important to learn to read your cat's body language so you can recognize her fear signals. Behaviors such as a wide-eyed stare, ears down, whiskers back, hissing, growling, head low, lip licking and a stiff body are all signs that indicate she is worried about something.

CAT SAFE ZONE

When you bring your new cat home set her up in a smaller space such as a spare bathroom, as opposed to giving her access to the entire house. The room needs to have adequate space for a litterbox, food & water dishes, toys, vertical and horizontal scratching surfaces and places to hide or get up high. Ideally, the room will have a window or other source for natural light. It is important that cats are able to express natural behaviors while in the room. If your cat already has access to the whole house and has picked a particular room to spend most of her time in, set up the Cat Safe Zone in that room.

Provide her with plenty of alternative hiding spaces in this room such as boxes, a chair with a blanket draped over it or a cocoon bed. Also provide vertical spaces such as cat trees and shelves on the wall. If she has alternative places to hide, she may choose those instead of hiding under the bed or in the closet.

Develop and stick to a schedule for litterbox cleaning, food refilling and socialization time. A predictable schedule of entering and exiting the Cat Safe Zone will help reduce the stress of your cat, as she won't be caught off guard or surprised when it happens.

PHEROMONES

Consider adding a Feliway diffuser in the Cat Safe Zone and other areas of your house or using Feliway spray on your cat's favorite resting spots. Studies have shown that these particular pheromone products may assist in reducing stress levels.

AT THE CAT'S PACE

One important thing to keep in mind when working with a fearful cat is interacting at the cat's pace. Forcing a fearful cat to lay in your lap, holding your cat or trying to catch your cat every time she comes out will make the fearful behaviors worse. If your cat is given the choice to investigate you or interact with you, she



will do so in a more confident and relaxed manner. Try sitting next to where your cat spends her time and read a book quietly out loud or listen to some relaxing music. Resist the urge to go to your cat if you see her come out to explore. The best bet is to ignore her and go about with what you are doing.

REWARDS

Rewarding your cat with tiny bits of high value treats (tuna fish, canned chicken, meat flavored baby food) when she chooses to interact with you is a great way to strengthen that behavior. If she is not ready to interact with you but does come out to explore, place tiny bits of high value food on plates in various places around the house. When she does come out to explore, she will be rewarded for that behavior when she finds the plates of food.










PLAY

Play is a fantastic stress reducer as it gives your cat a chance to use her natural behaviors such as pouncing, scratching, batting and chasing. Ideally, kittens should get at least four (4), fifteen (15) minute play sessions a day and adult cats should get at least two (2), fifteen (15) minute play sessions a day. If your fearful cat does not want to play with toys on her own, try engaging her with a “long distance” toy such as a piece of string or feather wand.

MEDICATION

There are medications available that may help cats that are very fearful. You will need to schedule a visit with a veterinary behaviorist to discuss medication options. Keep in mind, medication must be combined with a behavior protocol for it to be successful.

PAWSITIVELY HELPFUL HINTS

-  Keep your voice low and calm when interacting with a fearful cat. Avoid shouting or speaking in high pitched tones.
-  Be mindful of your body language when interacting with a fearful cat. Avoid direct eye contact, get down to the cat’s level, move slowly and let the cat come to you. Often a fearful cat will respond positively when initially approaching her if one uses a single finger and caresses the cheek area.
-  Use small bits of **very high value** treats like tuna fish, canned chicken or meat flavored baby food when working with a fearful cat.
-  Make sure the cat has a safe space in your home - a space where the cat can go to relax.
-  Offer lots of low to the ground hiding places (boxes, crates, shelves) and vertical spaces (shelves on the wall, cat towers) for your cats to go to feel safe. Ideally, your cats should be able to have enough vertical space that he/she can traverse a large portion of the house without ever having to touch the floor.
-  Several short sessions are better than a few long sessions.
-  Always stop a session on a positive note.
-  If you get frustrated during a session, stop and try again later.
-  Have patience - changing the behavior of a fearful cat will take time.