

Adopting a Fearful Cat

Why Are Some Cats Fearful?

Fearful behavior in cats is caused by various factors. A lack of interaction and socialization with people or with a variety of everyday stimuli during kitten-hood can leave them fearful of new people and new situations. Unpleasant or traumatic learning experiences can also cause prolonged fear. Cats can be genetically predisposed to being fearful while some are just fearful in the shelter but will be fine at home.

Introducing a Fearful Cat to a New Home

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

Many fearful cats who come to us become more confident slowly 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.

Start by confining the cat, preferably to a small room, and ensure that the cat can't hide in inaccessible places (like under the bed). Instead provide hiding places that are easily accessible and comfortable. Be sure to place the litter box within easy reach of the cat, but away from food and water.

Keep your new cat confined until he feels comfortable in the room and doesn't hide any more. Let him explore the rest of the house gradually (too much territory all at once may be overwhelming). If at any point during this process he regresses, confine him to his "safe" room for a few days and start over by only allowing access to one room at a time.

If you have other pets, do not introduce them until your new cat has bonded with you and is reasonably comfortable in the home. At this point you may also start to slowly introduce the cat to other people, but be sure not to overwhelm her.

Establishing a Trusting Relationship

Many fearful cats bond to their caretakers and make wonderful pets, but they remain shy with strangers and hide when people come over.

Tips to Help to Bring Your New Cat Out of His Shell

- Always talk softly and move slowly around the cat. Avoid staring at him 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 him.

- Food can be used as a bonding tool by feeding at scheduled times instead of leaving food out all the time. This will help your cat make a positive association between you and the food. You can also approach him cat with a small food treat to make friends. (Don't go overboard with treats. You don't want to ruin kitty's figure!)
- 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. Until then, gently pet him in his hiding place.
- Encourage play with interactive toys (like a cat dancer or other fishing pole type of toy that you hold and wiggle around), but make sure the toy you use is not big or scary. Some cats are very play motivated, and regular play sessions can help bring them out of their shell and out of hiding.
- Try not to startle the cat. If you have to do anything noisy in the house (vacuum, moving furniture, loud speakers, loud appliances, having a dinner party), confine your cat to his "safe" room.

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