

Cat: Adopting a Fearful Cat



The Big “Why” Question

Fear is common and a perfectly normal, innate, and adaptive behavior in all animals. However, if fear isn't addressed, it can develop into serious behavioral and health problems, so if your cat is showing fear or shyness you should always deal with it proactively.

Although it's possible that a fearful cat has suffered abuse or bad experiences, most of the time fear results from a combination of a genetic predisposition and some lack of exposure with positive experiences. Many cats are fearful at first in a new environment and need a little time to adjust.

For severe shyness and fear disorders, get help from SF SPCA's board-certified veterinary behaviorist. Don't live in the Bay Area? Search locally for a veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB), or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB). If your cat shows mild to moderate shyness or fear, here are some pointers:

How to Introduce 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 slowly become more confident as they get used to their living space and daily routine. Going to a new, strange environment can cause a fearful cat to regress at first in a new home. 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.

At first you should confine the cat, preferably to a small, quiet room, ensuring that the cat has some appropriate hiding spots but cannot hide in any inaccessible places (e.g. closet or under the bed). You should 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 the cat confined until he feels comfortable in the room and shows signs of wanting to explore the surroundings.

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 back 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 the 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 him.

How to Establish a Trusting Relationship

Many fearful cats bond to their caretaker(s) and make wonderful pets but retain a shyness towards strangers and hide when people come over.

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Tips that Will Help to Bring Your New Kitty Out of His Shell

It's best to ignore the cat and let him investigate on his own terms.

Talk softly and move slowly around the cat. Avoid staring or approaching him directly— that can feel threatening to any cat. It helps to get down to the cat's level when interacting with him 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 the cat make a positive association with you or your guests.

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.

Encourage play with interactive toys (e.g. cat dancer or fishing pole type toy), but make sure that the toy you are using is not big and 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, (e.g. vacuum, moving furniture, having a dinner party) confine the cat to his "safe" room.

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