

Caring for Fearful Cats

Many cats are fearful of new people, places, and/or things for a variety of reasons that may include a lack of exposure to new experiences, a traumatic incident, or simply a genetic predisposition. When bringing a fearful cat into your home, it is likely that you will not know the origin of your cat's fear. The most common reason for fearful behavior in cats who come from a shelter is lack of early socialization with humans.

There are several steps you can take to help your cat adjust to your home and new life to make the process as stress-free as possible. It is important to remember that if you don't know the cat's history, it is impossible to predict exactly how they will integrate into your home. While many fearful cats become social members of the family after a slow and appropriate introduction process, others may remain very fearful and prefer to spend most of their time alone. Be prepared for either outcome and celebrate the small steps your fearful cat makes along the way.

Before bringing home a cat with a history of fearful behavior, read through the cat body language handouts to help familiarize yourself with how cats communicate using their bodies. Being able to confidently identify how your cat is feeling and what they are communicating will help you throughout this process.

Setting Your Fearful Cat Up for Success:

Transitions and big changes are hard for many cats, even ones who are not identified as fearful. Preparing your home for your new cat, regardless of their confidence level, is a very important step in a smooth transition.

Set up a single room where your new cat can be isolated. A spare bedroom, office, or large bathroom will work well. Ideally this will be a quiet, low-traffic room. This room should contain food, water, toys, a hiding spot (this could be the carrier you bring your cat home in, or a cat condo with a hiding place), and two litter boxes. If the room is small and there is only room for one litterbox, just be sure to add the second when your cat has access to more parts of the home. Have a towel ready to block the crack under the door for when the door is closed.

Bringing Home a Fearful Cat:

The day you bring home your new cat is an exciting day for the whole family, but it will also be a very stressful time for your cat. It is important to set clear expectations with all family members that during the first few days, weeks, or possibly months, they should not expect pet the cat. It's important for the entire family to take a hands-off approach until the cat is comfortable and solicits attention on their own. When you arrive home with the cat still in their transport carrier, take the cat to the pre-setup room. Place the carrier on the floor, drape a towel/blanket over the sides for added privacy, and open the carrier door. Make sure the carrier door will stay open and leave the room; you may need to place a heavy object in front of the carrier door so it doesn't swing shut, or you can remove the door completely. The next step can be the hardest step, as you should leave your cat alone to explore their new room and decompress. It may be helpful and fun to set up



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a camera in the cat's room so the family can watch and observe the cat's behavior while staying out of the room.

Interacting with a Fearful Cat

During the first 24-72 hours, only go into the room to provide food, water, and clean the litter box. You can also leave behind a small piece of higher-value food or treats when you leave, like chicken or canned cat food. This will allow your cat time to destress after the move while beginning to associate you with something positive. Your fearful cat will likely be hiding when you enter the room. You will learn throughout the process that fearful cats spend a lot of time hiding, which is important for them to feel safe.

After the first couple of days, you can begin to build a relationship with your cat. **It is important that your cat always makes the choice to approach and solicit attention, not you.** This goes for cats of all confidence levels, whether they're your own pets or others you encounter: if a cat does not approach you, do not approach them. The majority of fearful cats choose to avoid humans and hide when they are scared. However, if they are cornered and feel trapped, it is likely they will escalate to showing aggression such as hissing, growling, swatting, or trying to bite because they do not have the option of moving away from you. If they are always allowed to approach or retreat when they choose, you will avoid putting your cat in a stressful situation where they feel they need to show aggression to ask for space.

Once your cat is used to their space after the first few days, you can start by entering the room, placing a small plate of high value food (ex. Canned food or a bit of tuna) on the floor close to the cat, and then sitting quietly on the opposite side of the room from the food. This would be a great time to catch up on some reading or your favorite TV show (just be sure to use headphones, as loud noises may be scary for your cat). Be careful not to stare at your cat because direct eye contact can be threatening for cats. Instead, speak softly to them and if they are looking at you, you can make soft eye contact with slow, exaggerated blinks.

Ideally, your cat will choose to come out and enjoy their snack while you are in the room. They will begin to build a positive association with you; person = yummy food. If your cat does come out for the snack, **do not approach.** Stay where you are, quietly continue what you were doing, and be internally excited that your cat made this big step in your relationship! The calmer you remain, the more likely they are to eventually approach you, while suddenly loud noises or quick movements can send them back to square one. Continue to practice this several times a day until your cat is readily coming out for the snack and has a relaxed body. You can begin to move the snacks closer to yourself over time as the cat's comfort level increases. If your cat does not eat the food with you present, that's okay. Leave the food and check back in a couple hours. The cat may not like that food or they were too stressed to eat in your presence.

Play can be another great tool to build a relationship with your cat and increase your cat's comfort level in the new space. Start by using a wand-type toy. This will allow you to stay farther away. Your cat may be comfortable interacting with toys, but not yet comfortable directly interacting with you. Start with the toy several feet away from where the cat is and drag the toy away from the cat. Avoid waving a toy in the face of your cat, which can be more frightening than fun.

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Continue to spend time in the same space as your cat, allowing them to make all the choices regarding interactions. Once your cat is approaching and soliciting attention, you can begin to gently pet them. Start by offering your closed fist for them to sniff – if they head-butt or rub against your hand, then try petting under their chin. Petting on top of the head or on the body can feel scary at first for many animals, but some scratches under the chin help them feel more in control of the situation since they can see your hand the whole time. Follow the 3-second rule with petting; pet for 3 seconds, then pause. If your cat re-initiates petting, pet again for 3 seconds and repeat. Do not begin petting again until the cat solicits attention. The most common ways for cats to solicit attention are by head butting, scent-marking, and rubbing against you. This creates a conversation between you and your cat; they ask for attention, you provide it. You pause and ask if they want more, they respond with “yes” or “no” using their body language. This gives the cat the power to control the level of interaction which will decrease the cat's stress and increase their level of comfort with you.



Adjustment Period

Every cat is an individual and will take a different amount of time to adjust to new surroundings and people in their lives. If you don't have other animals in the home, keep the cat in the single room until they are comfortable and confident moving around the space. This could take a few days or several weeks. If there are other animals in the home, keep the cat in the single room for at least 2 weeks (follow the handout on cat-cat and cat-dog introductions). It is important to allow your cat the time they need to become comfortable in your home. Depending on your cat's background, this may be their first time in a home environment. Patience is key during this process.

Expanding to the Rest of the House

Once your cat is comfortable moving around their isolated room, you can begin to introduce them to your home. Just like every process with our cats, it is important to go slowly. Introduce your cat to one room or section of your home at a time. Always allow them access to their original room, as they will see that as a safe space. Allow them to explore the new space at their own pace. Do so by opening the isolation room door and allow the cat to exit into the next room when they choose. Opening the door may cause your cat to retreat and hide, which is okay. Leave the door open and allow your cat time to choose to exit. Make sure the next part of the house is quiet and safe for the cat, because loud noises or sudden movements may cause your cat to regress. Block hiding spots in the new zones so if they do get scared, the cat retreats to their safe room instead of hiding under a bookshelf or couch in the living room where there is likely to be more commotion later in the day. If your cat chooses not to exit, that is okay. Give them another opportunity later. As always, this is the cat's choice. They get to choose when they are ready to explore and investigate more of your home.

Remember, it could take weeks or months to complete the process of introducing your fearful cat to your

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home and patience is key in this process. It will be so worth all the effort for you and your feline friend!

Some cats may never become social butterflies who enjoy petting and spending time with the people in their home, and that's perfectly ok. You can still provide them healthy, happy lives by meeting them at their level. Continue to allow your fearful cat places to hide throughout your home, give them opportunities to engage with enrichment without people present (See the cat enrichment handout for ideas), and allow access to their safe room, especially when guests are visiting or changes are happening in the home. =

Vet Visits

Going to the vet can be hard on many animals, but it is exceptionally hard for fearful cats. Plan ahead for vet visits by getting your cat comfortable in their carrier beforehand. (See our carrier handout). Place the carrier in their room with some high-value food inside, allowing the cat to move in and out of the carrier as they choose for several days. When vet visit day arrives, place food in the carrier, and hopefully, your cat will walk in due to the positive history built up around this behavior.

Talk to your vet ahead of time and have a plan. Waiting rooms can be loud and host a variety of animal species. Ask your vet to call you when your exam room is ready so you can stay in your car, and then move quickly into the exam room, avoiding the stressors of the waiting room. Some vets might recommend supporting your fearful cat with medication in advance. Proactively talk with your vet regarding their recommendations prior to your scheduled appointment.

Despite all your measures to reduce stress at the veterinary office, it can still be hard on your cat. When you return home, place your carrier into their safe room before opening the door. Allow them to exit the carrier whenever they feel comfortable.

It is a special experience to build a relationship and bond with a fearful cat, and it is deeply rewarding. Remember that the journey may be long, but your patience is a true gift to a nervous cat in need. If you have questions along the way, contact the Wisconsin Humane Society behavior department at asktheexpert@wihumane.org or 414-431-6173.