

The Fearful Cat

Cats can be fearful of a few or many things; some are afraid of almost all new situations or people, but are fine with those they know well, while others occasionally run into something scary, such as a visit to the veterinarian or a new, loud activity such as construction in their home.

Cats who are afraid will generally show it in one of three ways, which are sometimes called the three Fs: fight, flight, and freezing. If your cat tries one -- say, running away and hiding -- and it doesn't work, because the thing or person they're afraid of follows, they'll turn to another -- they might react aggressively when cornered, for example. Some cats will lose control of their bladder or bowels when they're extremely afraid.

When your cat is afraid, you may want to comfort them, but that may not be the best thing to do. If you try to show your cat there's nothing to be afraid of by carrying them closer or bringing the feared person or object near them, you can increase their fear. If your cat is hiding, it's usually best to let them come out in their own time. Many cats will spend a day or two hiding under a bed or in a closet after a traumatic event.

Helping Your Cat

Once you figure out what your cat is afraid of, you can slowly and carefully help them overcome their fear. Your cat might be afraid of a particular person or new people in general, loud noises, other animals, certain objects (especially if they're associated with past frightening events), or something else.

- If your cat's behavior has changed, start with a visit to your veterinarian for a thorough checkup -- a cat who is sick or in pain may be aggressive, hide, or have a change in appetite or litter box habits.
- If your cat hides, give them time to come out on their own. Don't try to force them, and maintain their normal routine as much as possible. Make sure they have easy access to food, water, and the litter box, and check these each day to make sure your cat is eating, drinking, and eliminating normally.
- When your cat comes out, quietly and calmly offer a delicious food treat or some gentle grooming if your cat enjoys it.
- Keep your cat's fear to a minimum by limiting their exposure to the scary thing or person.
- Gradually desensitize your cat: start with your cat at a distance from the stimulus (the frightening thing or person) -- far enough away that they're not showing any sign of fear -- feeding especially delicious treats, calmly praising or engage your cat in play with a new toy.
- Gradually bring the stimulus a small step closer, offering more treats and gentle praise. Move slowly and work in short sessions; if your cat shows any signs of fear, you've gone too far too fast, and you'll need to back up and start again.
- You can also help your cat to habituate, or get used to, some things they're afraid of. This is similar to desensitization, in that you keep the stimulus at a low level so that your cat doesn't show fear, but you allow your cat to decide when and how to approach, making it pleasant for them when they do.

What Not to Do

Don't ever punish your cat for showing fear; it will make the problem worse and may cause aggression. Also, don't force your cat to interact with people or things they're afraid of for the same reasons. If, for example, a person your cat is already afraid of forces contact, your cat may very well feel threatened enough to become aggressive, and will almost certainly be left with more fear rather than less.