



Helping A Fearful Cat

Many things can cause a cat to become fearful:

- Lack of socialization as a kitten
- Being the target of aggression by other animals
- Pain, illness or other medical issue
- Being the target of abuse
- Stressful living conditions (too many cats, tense family environment, etc.)
- Moving to a new home or other unfamiliar environment (like a shelter)
- Change in family (new owner, death, divorce, new baby, etc.)
- Excessive ongoing noise

You can help your fearful cat by providing a safe environment and building up trust. Here are some ideas to help create more security for a fearful cat:

Hideaways

A fearful cat feels more secure if he knows he can't be seen. If you want to encourage your cat to venture out, you need to set up cozy hideaways for him in all the rooms he frequents. "A" frame beds are great hideaways because the cat can peer out, and he knows he won't be ambushed from behind. High-sided beds are also good; cats love being able to curl up into a tight little ball and feel the sides of the bed surrounding them.

You can also create homemade hideaways with cardboard boxes. Place the box on its side and let one of the flaps hang down so the opening is partially covered. Line the box with a towel or cat bed for comfort. A cat tree is a great piece of real estate for a cat. Choose a cat tree that has at least one semi-enclosed perch. Some fearful kitties actually like being on an open perch up high because it gives them more warning time to see if someone is approaching.

Offer Choice

You can't convince your cat to get over his fear by forcibly holding him in your arms or insisting that he interact. What a fearful cat needs is choice. If he feels he has the choice to move closer to interact with you, then he'll be more relaxed about it. A cat who feels he has no choice will always feel backed in a corner and will look for the first opportunity to hide.

Offer Incentive

Reward your cat with food for any behavior you'd like to see again. Whenever the cat makes even the smallest positive step, just walking in the room or poking his head out from under the bed, reward him with a yummy treat. If your fearful cat won't take the treat from your hand, gently toss it closer to him. If the treat is wet food, place a little on a chop stick in order to put a distance between you and the cat. You can also tape soft-tipped baby spoons to the end of a chop stick in order to give the cat a larger amount of wet food.

Playtime

Use a fishing pole toy to encourage your fearful cat to play. The pole puts distance between you and the cat so he'll be able to stay in his comfort zone, even if that means he's partially hidden under the bed or behind a chair. Make your motions low-key – never frantic - and easy for the cat to conquer his prey.

You can choose other interactive toys based on your cat's personality. If he's extremely frightened, you may need to start with something like a feather and gradually work up to more challenging toys.

Resources

Locate resources – such as the litterbox, scratching post and food bowl - so your cat doesn't have to walk across the house to reach them. Create secure paths to those resources using soft-sided fabric tunnels (from your local pet supply store), or make your own by connecting several paper bags that have the bottoms cut out. If your cat doesn't feel safe then you'll never see him during the day; he'll only wander out to eat or use the litter box in the middle of the night when the family is asleep.

Respect Body Language

Observe and respect your fearful cat's body language. A contributing factor to his fearful behavior may be that his communication signals haven't been respected. If your cat's body language is saying "please don't come closer" and you continue to move toward him then he'll soon learn to dart away.

Environmental Enrichment

Appeal to your cat's curiosity and trigger his desire to play by creating a more interesting environment overall. Place puzzle feeders around and distribute interesting little toys for him to bat at for solo playtime. This will help him begin to form a positive association with his surroundings.

Information provided by Pam Johnson-Bennett, host of Animal Planet UK's PSYCHO KITTY. Pam is a pioneer in the field of cat behavior consulting, a best-selling author of nine books, including *Think Like a Cat*, and owns Cat Behavior Associates, a private, veterinarian-referred behavior company in Nashville, TN.

