



Reducing Your Cat's Fearful Behavior

The first step with any behavioral issue is to take your cat to the veterinarian for a full evaluation. Cats are very stoic animals and will hide illness and injury. Sometimes our only clue that something is physically wrong is a behavioral symptom. Many behavioral modification programs can begin in conjunction with or shortly after your trip to the veterinarian.

Cats tend to have one of the three reactions if faced with something they feel is a threat to them: fight, flight or freeze. Cats are not always good with change. Change is scary. Their routine has changed and they have no control over it.

Some cats are shy, timid, or fearful. Guardians want to protect them and often feel they are doing so by lavishing extra attention on them during those times the cat is feeling shy or fearful but doing so only confirms to the cat that this is a time to be scared. It's actually normal for a cat to feel shy, timid or scared when it is exposed to a new people, new pets or a new environment. Set up a safe room for your scared cat with a litter box, food, water and a scratcher. Provide a box for the cat to hide in if possible, or a tall bed. The cat needs time to explore the room it is in, take in all of the new sounds and scents until she feels safe and secure enough to graduate to other areas in the home and to new people or other pets. Keep your cats routine as consistent as possible. This will help her to feel safe, secure and more confident.

First you will need to determine what triggers the fearful behavior. Things your cat might be afraid of: sudden noises, sudden movement, loud noises, another pet in the home, something new in the home, the carrier, car rides. Maybe your neighbor brings over their new puppy, and the rambunctious pup happily runs over to your cat to play. Your cat might not like the sudden movements, the barking, the smell of the puppy and the fact that there was never a puppy in the home before! Your cat might react by hissing, growling, puffing up, swatting, or even biting/attacking to get the threat to back away.

Fearful cats might run away and hide where the puppy or scary thing can't get to them. The cat might even have a safe spot in the house and go there any time she feels afraid of anything. Other cats might freeze and not move at all because she is so frightened. Some cats might even lose control over their bladder or bowels during extremely fearful situation. If the cat is cornered and continues to feel threatened, the only option left may be to defensively attack.

If your cat is showing any of these fear behaviors take steps to reduce the cat's fear as soon as possible. Remove the threat and begin work on desensitizing your cat to what she perceives to be a threat. Be patient, this may take some time. Baby steps are required. Overcoming the fear will be on the cat's timetable.

Start at a distance where your cat is comfortable and not displaying any stress at all. Use an extra tasty treat or an irresistible toy to use as a reward or distraction. Encourage your cat to move closer. At any time your cat appears stressed or tense, take a few steps back to where she is comfortable. Over time, with treats or playtime as a reward and distraction, your cat should associate what was perceived to be a threat with a positive thing. *See also the article on Training Your Cat Using Positive Reinforcement.*

If the cat is afraid of a particular person, that person can help by tossing treats and ignoring the cat until the cat feels comfortable enough to approach that person on her own. This has to be on the cat's terms! Keep sessions short until some progress starts to appear.

Do not ever punish the cat for being afraid. The cat is already afraid; she doesn't need to also be afraid of her own guardian. Also, the cat might be so scared of and confused by the punishment she may become aggressive in an attempt to protect herself.

Do not rush the process of desensitization. It is very important to follow the cat's timeline otherwise it could make the situation even worse and the cat more fearful.

When your cat is fearful, be very cautious in approaching, touching or picking her up. She may redirect her aggression on to you, completely out of fear. *See also the article on Cat Aggression toward People.*

If after trying these suggestions you are still experiencing undesirable behaviors in your cat, SUBMIT QUESTIONS by clicking the link under Ask A Trainer on the Behavior and Training page of the Wayside Waifs website: www.waysidewaifs.org.

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