BEHAVIOR SERIES

Reducing Your Cat's Fearful Behavior

FIGHT, FLEE, OR FREEZE. No, it isn't the latest game show sweeping the nation. Instead, these three "f's" describe the ways that cats usually respond to objects, persons, or situations they perceive as a threat.

It's normal for you to want to help and comfort your cat when she's frightened. However, that isn't necessarily the best thing to do from your cat's point of view. It's normal for a cat to feel insecure or frightened in a new environment. Often, your new cat will hide for a day or two when you first bring her home. Sometimes a traumatic experience—such as taking her for a car ride to the veterinarian or introducing a new animal into the home—can disrupt her routine and send her under the bed for a few days.

Each cat has her preferred way of dealing with a crisis. You'll notice that your cat probably tends to try one option first, and if that doesn't work, she's forced to try a different option. For instance, if your cat is afraid of dogs and a friend brings his dog to your home to visit, your cat puffs out her fur to make herself look big, then hisses and spits at the dog. If the dog doesn't retreat, your cat may flee the situation, find a hiding spot, and freeze until she deems the situation safe.

Your cat may show the following behaviors when she is fearful:

- Fleeing
- Hiding
- Aggression (which includes spitting, hissing, growling, swatting, biting, scratching, puffing fur and tail, arching back, swishing tail, and flattening ears)
- Loss of control over bladder or bowels
- Freezing

Although some fearful behaviors are acceptable, overly anxious or fearful cats may need help from you in the form of training, patience, and love.

What Causes Fearful Behavior?

You'll need to observe your cat closely to determine the trigger for her fearful behavior. Keep in mind that just because you know that the person or animal approaching your cat has good intentions doesn't mean your cat shares the same view. The trigger for her fearful behavior could be anything. Some common triggers are:

- A particular person
- A stranger
- Another animal
- A child
- Loud noises

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What You Can Do

Take the following steps to reduce your cat's anxiety and help her become more confident:

- First, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian for a thorough physical examination to rule out any medical reasons for your cat's fearful behavior. Cats don't always act sick, even when they are. Any sudden behavior change could mean that your cat is ill. Some common symptoms that suggest your cat may be sick are sudden aggressiveness, hiding, and eliminating outside the litter box.
- If your cat is healthy, but hiding, leave her alone. She'll come out when she's ready. Forcing her out of her hiding spot will only make her more fearful. Make sure she has easy access to food, water, and her litter box. Clean the litter box and change the food and water every day so you know whether she is eating and drinking.
- Keep any contact with the fear stimulus to a minimum.
- Keep your cat's routine as consistent as possible. Cats feel more confident if they know when to expect daily feeding, playing, cuddling, and grooming.
- Try to desensitize your cat to the fear stimulus by following these steps:
    - Determine what distance your cat can be from the fear stimulus without responding fearfully.
    - Introduce the fear stimulus at this distance while you're feeding your cat tasty treats and praising her.
    - Slowly move the fear stimulus closer as you continue to praise your cat and offer her treats.
    - If at any time during this process your cat shows fearful behavior, you've proceeded too quickly and will need to start over from the beginning. This is the most common mistake people make when desensitizing an animal; it can be avoided by working in short sessions, paying careful attention to your cat so that you don't progress too rapidly for her.
    - You may need help with the desensitization process from an animal-behavior specialist.

A Note about Aggression

If your cat seriously threatens you, another person, or an animal—and the behavior is not an isolated incident—you should seek help as soon as possible from an animal-behavior specialist. Contact your veterinarian or animal shelter for assistance or a referral if you need a specialist. To keep everyone safe in the meantime, confine your cat to an area of the house where all interactions with her are kept to a minimum and are supervised by a responsible person.

Cat bites and scratches are serious and can easily become infected. Bites that need to be treated by a doctor should be reported to your local animal control agency; your cat may need to be quarantined and watched for signs of rabies. If you can't keep your cat separated from the stimulus that triggers her aggressive behavior and you're unable to work with an animal-behavior specialist, you may need to reevaluate the cat's situation in your home. Remember, trying to place an aggressive cat in a new home should be done with extreme caution. The safety of your cat and of the other animals and humans she encounters should be your first consideration.

What Not to Do

- Do not punish your cat for her fearful behavior. Animals associate punishment with what they're doing at the time they're punished, so your cat is likely to associate any punishment you give her with you. This will only cause her to become fearful of you, and she still won't understand why she's being punished.
- Do not force your cat to experience the object or situation that is causing her fear. For example, if she is afraid of a certain person, don't let that person try to pick her up and hold her; this will only make her more fearful of that person.
- Be cautious in handling your cat when she is frightened. She may accidentally direct her aggression toward you.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
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- Cat Aggression toward People

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