

## Your Fearful Cat

Cats need to feel safe in their environment to truly be happy, relaxed and playful. When they feel threatened, they usually respond in these ways to the object, person or situation they perceive as a threat:

- Hiding
- Puffing up, hissing, growling, swatting, biting, scratching
- Loss of control over bladder and/or bowels
- Freezing in place

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, you might notice your cat puffs out her fur to make herself look big, then hisses 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.

### What Triggers Fearful Behavior?

You'll need to closely observe your cat to determine the trigger for her fearful behavior. Some common triggers are:

- A stranger intruding into the home
- Other animals
- Children
- Loud noises
- A new environment
- A car journey
- A trip to the veterinarian's office

Remember: just because you know there is no real danger doesn't mean your cat feels safe.

### What You Can Do

It's understandable that you want to help and comfort your cat when she's frightened; however, this isn't necessarily the best thing to do from your cat's point of view. Often, a new cat will hide for a day or two when you first bring her home - this is normal. Sometimes, a traumatic experience - like a visit to the veterinarian, or introducing a new animal into the household - can disrupt her routine and send her under the bed for a few days.

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

- Schedule an appointment with your veterinarian to rule out any medical reasons for your cat's fearful behavior. Any sudden behavior change could mean that your cat is ill.
- If your cat is healthy, but hiding, leave her alone for a few days. To force 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 from her hiding place. Clean the litter box and change the food and water every day so you know whether she is eating and drinking.
- If you know the trigger, keep any contact with the trigger to a minimum.

- Keep your cat's routine as regular as possible. Cats feel more confident if they know when to expect daily feeding, playing, petting and grooming.
- Try to desensitize your cat to the fear stimulus (you may need help from an animal behavior specialist):
  1. Determine what distance your cat can be from the fear stimulus without responding fearfully.
  2. Introduce the fear stimulus at this distance while you're feeding your cat tasty treats and praising her.
  3. Slowly move the fear stimulus closer as you continue to praise your cat and offer her treats.
  4. 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, and 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.

### **What Not To Do**

- Don't punish your cat for her fearful behavior. This will only cause her to become fearful of you and she most likely won't understand why she's being punished.
- Don't force her 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 frightened of that person.

### **Note:**

If your cat is offensively threatening you, another person or an animal, you should seek help from a professional animal behavior specialist. To keep everyone safe, confine your cat to an area of the house where all interactions with her are kept to a minimum and are supervised. Cat bites and scratches are serious and can easily become infected. The safety of your cat and the other animals and humans she encounters should be your first consideration.

**Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.**