



## Adopting a Frightened Feline

Cats thrive in a consistent environment, and cats in shelters have experienced several major changes in a short amount of time. All of the cats that enter a shelter are stressed on some level. However, the cat that you are choosing to adopt today either has a history of being fearful or hasn't adjusted as quickly to this environment as most other cats.

We want the transition into your home to be as stress-free as possible for you and your new cat. This handout will guide you in creating that transition.

It is impossible to tell exactly why your cat is behaving so nervously. She could simply find this environment, along with the loss of her previous way of life, to be overwhelming and as a result she has retreated from her normal personality while adjusting to all these massive changes. Another more serious possibility is that she was under-socialized, her fearful behavior is genetic, or a combination of both. If that is the case, your cat's fearful nature will never go away completely. Unfortunately, there is no way for us to know if your cat is simply overwhelmed or if she is genetically predisposed to being afraid. Only once she is in a safe, consistent home will you begin to see her true personality.

### **Cats Are Masters of Communication**

Cats have many signals that they use to tell us when they're uncomfortable. It is important that we respect these signals, so that your cat does not feel the need to escalate to hissing, swatting, scratching or biting in order to make his feelings more clear. If your cat seems uncomfortable, give him the time and space he needs to calm down before attempting closer interaction. Eventually he will learn that you can be trusted because you have respected his signals and his desire to be left alone. Some common signs that cats use to communicate fear are:

- Ears pinned back
- Wide eyes with dilated pupils
- Whiskers flat against face
- Lip-licks
- Huddled, tense posture
- Leaning away from the "threat"
- Tucked tail
- Puffed up hair
- Hiding

## **“I need a safe room!”**

If your nervous cat could speak, she would say, “I need a safe room!” A safe room is where your cat can have places to hide, get up high, and scratch along with all the other necessities: food, water, litter box and toys. At first, this room should be kept shut so that she can adjust to a smaller area before being thrown into an entire house. Even if there are no other animals in the home, having her adjust to smaller areas one at a time should take less time than giving her full access to your home all at once. The most important part about this transition into the rest of the home is that it be done on the cat’s terms, not yours. Pay attention to your cat’s body language to tell you the next step.

After your cat is doing well in the home, have her safe room available for her whenever she may need it. At this point, your home should have:

- Places to hide, like boxes with blankets. Children and other pets should not be allowed to bother the cat if she retreats to her hiding spot.
- Places to perch up high (ex. shelves, tall furniture, cat trees, etc.)
- A quality scratching post. Sturdy, vertical, sisal posts are best. The SmartCat Ultimate Scratching Post is a great one.
- A good litter box set-up. One box per cat, plus one extra, placed in open, quiet spaces where the cat won’t feel trapped. Uncovered boxes with unscented, clumping litter and no liner are best.

Other helpful options are Feliway or Comfort Zone which mimics a cat’s “friendly” pheromones to help the cat to feel safe and secure in her environment. In more extreme cases, medication may be another helpful tool. Talk to your vet about any medication you are considering.

## **The Importance of Consistency**

Cats generally like to have the same daily schedule, and very few changes to their environment. Small changes to us can feel like big changes to your cat, especially if he is a nervous cat. For instance, the next-door neighbors bringing home a new outdoor pet, people coming home at different times than normal, new visitors, and even new smells can add to a cat’s fearfulness. Whenever possible, introduce changes slowly, one at a time, over several days or weeks, so that the changes do not become overwhelming. If changes cannot occur slowly, placing your cat in his safe room will be the best solution.

## **Human Body Language**

When working with a fearful cat, it is important to be aware of what signals you are giving off from the cat’s point of view. Some good things to practice are:

- Wait for the cat to approach you. This can take a long time, so patience is key.
- Let the cat sniff you before touching.
- Touch cheeks and chin with one finger. Petting over their head or with your whole hand seems threatening to a cat.
- Make yourself look small by crouching down. Looming over an animal is scary for them.
- Speak in a calm, quiet voice, even if you’re not directly talking to the cat. Loud noises are scary and threatening.

## How to Build Your Cat's Confidence

Okay, bear with me for a moment. Engaging in play can actually build your nervous cat's confidence. Cats are hunters, and need opportunities to express those behaviors. Both individual play (mice, jingle balls, etc.) and interactive play are important. For interactive play, use wands, fishing rod toys, and lasers to encourage the cat to chase and pounce on the "prey." At least twice a day, set aside 10-15 minutes to interactively play with your cat. If she doesn't seem interested, that's okay, over time her instincts will kick in and she'll engage.

Tips on how to engage with your cat:

- Do not touch the cat if she is giving off signals that she wants to be left alone. Back up, offer treats or toys to lure the cat closer, or simply try again later once the cat is calmer.
- Use high value treats such as tuna, shredded chicken, lunch meat, or canned food to reward the cat for being near you. This will help the cat learn that good things happen around people, not bad things. Take it slow; at first just give the cat treats on a spoon while he or she is in the hiding spot, then gradually lure the cat closer and closer to you.
- Use fishing rod toys to engage the cat in play, luring her close to you slowly. Even if the cat just watches the toy and does not directly interact, it is still a positive experience. As the cat gains confidence, she will start playing more and more.
- Allow the cat to touch you, instead of you touching her. This way the cat learns that you are safe and will not try to pick up or restrain her. Once the cat is behaving in a more confident manner, and will walk up to you to get the toys and/or treats, you can try gently touching with one finger on the cheek or chin. You can gradually increase contact as the cat becomes more comfortable with you. The experience needs to remain positive, so being very respectful and slowly increasing contact is important.
- Each member of the household should work with your cat, so that she does not only learn to like one person and stay fearful of everybody else. Children need to be very closely monitored, and if they are not being slow and respectful, they need to be separated from the cat until they are ready to try again.
- Avoid punishing or yelling at your cat. If she is hissing or swatting, it's because she is scared, and punishment will only make her more afraid.

The degree to which your cat improves will vary greatly depending on the individual. Some cats will always be a little shy, but all will improve with patience. If you need more information or tips on how to safely desensitize your fearful cat, please call the behavior helpline at 517-626-6060 ext. 141, or email us at [behavior@AdoptLansing.org](mailto:behavior@AdoptLansing.org). Thank you for adopting!