

It's normal for you to want to help and comfort your cat when they are 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 them home. Sometimes a traumatic experience—such as taking them for a car ride to the veterinarian or introducing a new animal into the home—can disrupt their routine and send them under the bed for a few days.

Each cat has their 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, they are 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 their fur to make them 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 they deem the situation safe.

Your cat may show the following behaviors when they are 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 their 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 their fearful behavior could be anything. Some common triggers are:

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

What You Can Do

Take the following steps to reduce your cat's anxiety and help them 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 them alone. They will come out when they are ready. Forcing them out of their hiding spot will only make them more fearful. Make sure they have easy access to food, water, and their litter box. Clean the litter box and change the food and water every day so you know whether they are 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 them.
- Slowly move the fear stimulus closer as you continue to praise your cat and offer them 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 them.
- 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 them 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 their 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 they encounter should be your first consideration.

What Not to Do

- Do not punish your cat for their 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 them with you. This will only cause them to become fearful of you, and they still won't understand why they are being punished.

- Do not force your cat to experience the object or situation that is causing their fear. For example, if they are afraid of a certain person, don't let that person try to pick them up and hold them; this will only make them more fearful of that person.
- Be cautious in handling your cat when they are frightened. They may accidentally direct their aggression toward you.



Changing Lives... Four Paws at a Time!

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The Auburn Valley Humane Society is dedicated to providing shelter, quality care and love for all the lost, mistreated and abandoned animals in Auburn. AVHS utilizes all available resources to ensure each animal is placed into a loving and forever home and promotes responsible pet ownership through education and outreach.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
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Reducing Your Cat's Fearful Behavior



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