



**Cedar Valley  
Humane Society**

# Cat Care and Behavior: Fearful Cats

Fight, flee, or freeze are three terms that describe how cats usually respond to objects, people, or situations they see as threatening.

## **What causes fearfulness**

Every cat is different, and each has his own way of dealing with a crisis and deciding what is a crisis.

A naturally timid cat may be afraid of many things and spend a lot of his life in hiding, while a naturally confident cat will be less fearful and will usually recover more quickly from scary events.

For example, one cat may confront a strange dog by hissing, spitting, and puffing out his fur to make himself look big. Or he may decide to cut his losses and beat a hasty retreat. Some cats are so overwhelmed with fear that they simply freeze, too terrified to run. A really laid-back cat, on the other hand, may not see the dog as a threat; he may simply sniff the dog and walk away.

## **What is fearful behavior?**

Your cat might show the following behaviors when he's afraid:

- Fleeing
- Hiding
- Aggression (which includes spitting, hissing, growling, swatting, biting, scratching, puffing fur and tail, arching back, swishing tail, and flattening ears)
- Freezing in place
- Losing control of bladder/bowels
- Releasing anal glands
- Refusing to use the litter box

## **Common fear triggers**

You'll need to observe your cat carefully to determine the reasons for his fearful behavior. Some common triggers are:

- A loud noise or a quick movement
- A strange environment
- A strange person or animal
- An active child
- A stressful event, such as a move or a trip to the vet

## **What's normal?**

Some fearful behaviors are acceptable and normal. For example, most cats will feel insecure or frightened in a new environment. Often, your cat will hide for a day or two when introduced to a new home.

Sometimes a traumatic experience—such as taking him to the veterinarian or bringing a new animal into the home—can disrupt his routine and send him under the bed for a few days.

But some cats are so fearful that they seem to live in a near-constant state of anxiety, or they may redirect their fear into aggression toward people or other animals.

## **What to do**

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

- If your cat is healthy, but hiding, leave him alone. He'll come out when he's ready. Forcing him out of his hiding spot will only make him more fearful. Make sure he has easy access to food, water, and a litter box. Clean the litter box and change the food and water every day so you know whether he's eating and drinking.
- Keep any contact with the fear stimulus to a minimum until you've had time to train your cat using desensitization and counter-conditioning techniques.
- 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.
- If your cat continues to hide or act anxious, take him to the veterinarian for a thorough physical exam to rule out any medical reasons for his fearful behavior. If he's not ill, he may benefit from a calming product like Feliway or a short course of anti-anxiety medication.
- You may want to seek advice from a cat behavior specialist.
- Food is a great motivator for cats, so if yours is afraid of someone in the house, give that person feeding duty.

## **What not to do**

- Don't punish your cat for his fearful behavior. Punishment only makes fear-based behaviors worse, and he'll likely become afraid of you.
- Don't force your cat to experience the object or situation that's frightening him. For example, if he's afraid of a certain person, don't let that person try to pick him up and hold him. Instead, help your cat gradually overcome his fear through desensitization and counter-conditioning.
- It's normal for you to want to help and comfort your cat when he's frightened. But that isn't necessarily the best thing to do from your cat's point of view. And he might redirect his fear into aggression toward you.

## **A note about aggression**

- If your cat seriously threatens you, another person, or an animal-and the behavior isn't an isolated incident-you should seek help as soon as possible from a cat behavior specialist.
- To keep everyone safe in the meantime, confine your cat to an area of the house where you can keep all interactions with him to a minimum and have a responsible person supervise him.
- Treat all cat bites and scratches seriously; remember that they can easily become infected.