



Issue: Helping a Fearful Cat

You just adopted a new cat! They may have been a bit shy during your interaction at the adoption center; their body was low, eyes wide, their tail stayed curled around the body. They allowed all petting and you were confident they'd warm up at home in no time, but now they're hiding under the bed and won't come out to play. What are you going to do?

It's completely normal for a cat to need an adjustment period before feeling confident and comfortable enough in a new environment. Cats are sensitive to stimuli and are both prey and predator out in the wild so any fear behavior or defense mechanisms that may be manifesting now has previously served a purpose – to allow for survival. Your cat is not “mean” or “bad,” they are just afraid. With the proper tools and techniques it's possible to show your new companion that they don't have anything to fear and are safe in their new home.

Safe Space

Start your cat off in a small enclosed room, instead of allowing them free roam of your entire home. Free roam means more nooks and crannies to hide in, so you may not know where your new cat is hiding. Giving them a smaller enclosure will help your cat adjust quicker to that particular space, and you can spend quality time with them in that area to help them form a positive association with you.

Create a Calm and Inviting Environment

A new cat needs to have opportunities to hide and observe their new environment on their own terms. By offering hiding spots both on the ground and higher up in the home, you are helping your cat feel in control of how and when they decide they want to investigate; and this in turn builds confidence. You can help your cat by offering boxes and covered cat beds on the floor, as well as shelves, perches or cat trees to provide higher points of observation. By offering hiding spots both above and on the ground level, you are giving your cat the option of retreating as well as observing from a higher point of view. You can also offer calming scent sprays such as Feliway, a synthetic pheromone that has been found to help calm some nervous cats. This product can be purchased in the form of sprays or plug-ins.

Reward Positive Behavior

Give your cat a special treat every time they interact with you! If your cat is especially nervous, you can simply reward for brief interactions until they feel more comfortable. This may include your cat poking their head out to sniff your hand, make eye contact when you talk to them, or leaning forward to show interest. Once they're more relaxed and feel comfortable approaching you, you can begin to reward them for soft body language, a raised tail, a pet along the head and ears shifting forward. You build each positive interaction up as the days go on until they learn to associate you and your touch with something good and tasty. Treats and food can go a long way for cats that are food motivated! Don't give up if your cat is still hiding after the first couple of attempts – positive association takes time but is proven to help cats get comfortable with new interactions, people and with touch.

Power of Choice

Last but not least, always remember to let your cat choose when and how they interact with you. Never force an interaction on a nervous cat. Let them CHOOSE to come to you, let them investigate on their own terms, and reward with treats for each brave step they take. Your cat needs to feel as though they decided it was time to interact. Follow their lead because any forced situation may take them back a few steps and create a negative association, which is the opposite of what you want to do.

Play Therapy

Get some wand toys, catnip and other forms of enrichment and be sure to play with them once they're comfortable enough to engage. Playing will create confidence in your new companion and help them feel like the king or queen of their new domain!

With patience and practice your new cat will be happy and comfortable in their new home with their new best friend – you!

Please see related flyer: ***"Decompression Period"***

Resources:

<https://www.thesprucepets.com/building-confidence-in-fearful-cats-555505>

For more information:

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: <https://m.iaabc.org/>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org/>