



# Westerly Animal Shelter

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## THE FEARFUL CAT

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When cats feel threatened, they usually respond in three ways to the object, person, or situation they perceive as a threat: fight, flee, or freeze. Some cats become so frightened they lose control of their bladder or bowels and eliminate right where they are. Each cat has his/her 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, 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 the following: first, your cat puffs out her fur to make herself 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 she deems the situation safe.

### Your cat may show the following behaviors when she is fearful:

- Hiding
- Aggression (spitting, hissing, growling, piloerection, swatting, biting, scratching)
- Loss of control over bladder and/or bowels
- Freezing in place

### What Causes Fearful Behavior?

You'll need to closely observe your cat to determine the trigger for her fearful behavior. Keep in mind that just because you know that the person or animal approaching your cat has good intentions, doesn't mean that she feels safe. The trigger for her fearful behavior could be anything. Some common triggers are:

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

It's normal for you to 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. It's normal for a cat to feel insecure or frightened in a new environment. Often, your new cat will hide a day or two when you first bring her home. 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.

### What You Can Do

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

- If you have a new cat, set her up in a small area, like a bathroom, with food, a water bowl, a bed, a scratching post and a litter box. Visit her every day, several times a day, doing positive things when with her, like offering high value treats or engaging in play. As she starts to become more comfortable, and is seeking attention, you can then let her out into the rest of your house. Start with another small area of your house though and build up to giving her total access.
- If this is a cat you have had for a while, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian for a thorough physical exam 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 and should be taken seriously. Some common symptoms that your cat may be ill are aggressiveness, hiding, and eliminating outside the litter box.

- If your cat is healthy, but hiding, leave her alone. She'll come out when she's ready. 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.
- Keep any contact with the fear stimulus 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, cuddling, and grooming.
- Try to desensitize and counter condition your cat to the fear stimulus:
- 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, praising her, or engaging in play. By pairing positive things with the fear stimulus, your cat will begin to make good associations and overtime learn that whenever the fear stimulus appears, good things happen!
- When your cat is no longer showing fearful behaviors, slowly move the fear stimulus closer as you continue to treat, praise, or play with your cat.
- 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 and counter conditioning 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.
- You may need help from a professional animal behavior specialist with the desensitization and counter conditioning process.

## **Realistic Expectations**

Some of the things that frighten cats can be difficult to reproduce and/or control. For example, if your cat is afraid of thunderstorms, she may be responding to other things that occur during the storm, such as smells, barometric pressure changes, and/or changes in the light. During the desensitization process it is impossible for you to reproduce all of these factors. If your cat is afraid of men, you may work at desensitizing and counter conditioning her, but if an adult man lives in your household and your cat is constantly exposed to him, this can disrupt the gradual process of desensitization.

## **Consult With Your Veterinarian**

Medication may be available that can help your cat feel less anxious for short time periods. Your veterinarian is the only person who is licensed and qualified to prescribe medication for your cat. Do not attempt to give your cat any over-the-counter or prescription medication without consulting with your veterinarian. Animals do not respond to drugs the same way people do, and a medication that may be safe for humans could be fatal to your cat. Drug therapy alone will not reduce fears and phobias permanently. In extreme cases, behavior modification and medication used together may be the best approach.

## **New Products**

There are products being marketed by reputable companies to help with anxiety and stress relief in cats. Please note that none of these is an automatic cure for fear/anxiety, but should be used in conjunction with behavior modification techniques. Please see our handout "Stress Relief for Your Pet" for more information.

## **What Not To Do**

- Don't punish your cat for her 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 her with you. This will only cause her to become fearful of you and she still 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.

## **A Note About Aggression**

If your cat is threatening you, another person or an animal, you should seek help from a professional animal behavior specialist. To keep everyone safe in the meantime, confine your cat to an area of the house where all interactions with her are kept to a minimum and are supervised by a responsible person. Cat bites and scratches are serious and can easily be infected. Bites should be reported to your local animal control agency so that your cat can be quarantined and watched for signs of rabies. If you can't keep your cat separated from the stimuli that brings on her aggressive behavior and you're unable to work with a professional animal behavior specialist, please consider having your cat humanely euthanized. The safety of your cat and the other animals and humans she encounters, should be your first consideration.