

Cat Behavior Series: The Shy Cat



Why Are Cats Shy

Cats are creatures of comfort and of the status quo. They do not respond well to changes in their environment. Their usual reaction to an unwelcome change will be to distance themselves. They may retreat to a hiding place or, if pushed, they may react aggressively. For a cat, hiding is a normal response to a new or frightening situation. Some cats are shy and fearful because of an illness. If this is new behavior, have her checked by a veterinarian. There are cats that respond to a new person in the household, be it an adult or baby, by running and hiding. Introducing a new dog or new cat to your household might elicit the same response. If yours is an outside cat she may have been startled by a stranger or an animal, or she may have lost a good fight.

These experiences may result in a fearfulness that will convert her to a shy-acting inside cat. A sudden loud noise like thunder, a firecracker, or an engine backfire might send your cat under the bed for months. A phobic shyness indicates that proper socialization did not take place when your cat was an unweaned kitten. Proper socialization occurs when a very young kitten is handled and cuddled by all kinds of people, sniffed and touched by dogs and cats, and exposed to all kinds of noise out there in the world. Things are not as frightening if they have been experienced in the comfort and security of one who loves you.

Some cats don't have enough human contact as kittens—they're comfortable with other cats, but they're afraid of people. The most sensitive point in kitten development is at two to seven weeks. The cat should receive gentle handling at that point. But the lessons remain important up to three months of age—the kitten should have many positive experiences with people, other animals, being held and carried, riding in the car, going to the veterinarian, and so on. The idea is to create an outgoing cat. If a cat is afraid of people—maybe guests, maybe a spouse—you can slowly recondition it to accept them.

There are a few methods. First of all, understand that visitors can be frightening to a cat right off the bat—the doorbell is loud, the conversation when people first enter the home is usually boisterous. The cat will typically bolt quickly. Enlist the help of a friend to try to coax the cat out of its anxiety. The cat shouldn't know the friend well. Females are preferable because of their higher voices—in the cat world, a low voice is threatening. The friend should enter your home and sit down as soon as possible—on the floor would be best. Many really shy cats will only come up if you're in a prone position, looking up at people is very intimidating to a cat. Don't stare at the cat—stares are threatening. When the cat is in view, toss a treat in that direction, eventually drawing the cat closer as you drop the treats nearer. Or you can use toys to draw the cat out—toys that allow the cat to keep space between itself and the visitor are best—a pole with a dangling toy on the end of it, for instance. Slowly the cat learns to associate your guest with positive things.

Another method uses a cat carrier. When you invite people over, place the cat in a large, comfortable carrier, partially cover it, and keep it in the room with you. This allows the cat to become familiar with hearing other voices and loud noise in the home even as he remains hidden, if he wants, and protected. Eventually, let the visitors talk to the cat in the carrier—the visitor can try to establish

contact, or feed the cat some treats. Don't take the cat out of the carrier yet, though. Let contact happen through the bars. After you've tried that a few times, and the cat remains calm, try taking the cat out of the carrier in the presence of the visitor. The visitor should not try to touch the cat—you should hold it. Eventually the cat should learn that visitors are harmless, at which point touching will be possible and the cat won't bolt the moment someone enters the home. It's a slow process. Sometimes pharmaceuticals can help, and you should discuss this option with your veterinarian. The key is patience.

The Snug Retreat

If you are working with an already shy cat, or bringing home a new shy cat, a snug-retreat can be a very useful tool. Put the shy cat in the snug retreat during its initial introduction to the home, so that the cat can become familiar with the sights, smells and sounds of the home from a safe vantage point. Use the snug retreat when company is visiting, or other stressful high activity times when the cat needs a secure location.

A snug retreat is a large enough enclosed space- usually a medium sized dog crate, which can house a cat bed, litter box and water bowl. This space is used for several hours each day to allow the cat to relax in a stress free environment. When the cat is not in the retreat the door is kept closed so that no other cat has access to the litter box inside.

Many cats look forward to sleeping in a snug retreat and will run to their bed at night. Some cats prefer to have their snug retreat covered with a blanket or the like to make it seem more "cave like" other prefer to have the visibility of open sides.

A cat will be happier to use their snug retreat if it is also used as a place where they can get cat treats, or that is lightly scented with catnip.

Tips for Socializing a Shy Cat

- Play a radio for several hours each day to acclimatize the cats to a wide variety of the sounds.
- Make eye contact.
- Blink slowly and often to indicate you are not aggressive.
- Keep a low profile, spend time with the cat while laying down, or under covers.
- Talk in a soft, soothing voice.
- Move slowly and predictably.
- Introduce feather wands and fleece padded sticks for the cats' inspection,
- softly touch the sides of the cat's face with the wands.
- slide your hand down the wand gradually until you can stroke the cat's cheek or chin.
- Be patient.
- Make sure that all canned food, treats, catnip, etc. is directly related to the cat being social with people, and is an obvious reinforcement for desired behaviors.
- Keep the basics in the cat's life as predictable as possible: litterbox location, feeding time, etc.
- Try pheromone products such as Feliway™
- Consider using a vet who makes house calls and an in-home pet sitter.