

The Sanctuary Room

Moving is always difficult, even more so when you are an animal transitioning from life in a shelter to life in a home! When bringing a new feline friend into your house, it is important to make the transition as stress-free as possible for both you and your new cat. All cats, even those who appeared carefree or confident in the shelter, would benefit from starting their new life in your home in a sanctuary room. This is especially important if you have other pets in your home already.



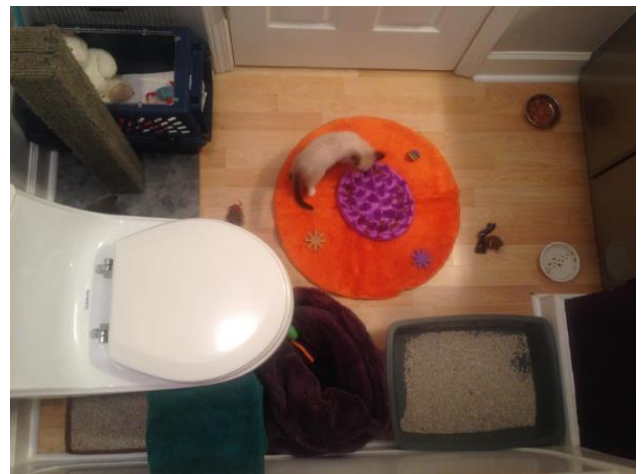
Preparing for your cat's arrival

Choosing which room to use

The sanctuary room can be any room in your home with a door. Smaller rooms are best – it is only a temporary space and they are likely much larger than the space your cat had in the shelter! Very large rooms or rooms with multiple doors (such as hallways) are not recommended, as your cat may feel overwhelmed by all the space and movement. Your bedroom is ideal because bedrooms are generally quiet and low traffic. Plus your cat has chance to check you out and give you some preliminary sniffs while you sleep and appear unthreatening. Whatever room you choose, you should feel free to use the room as you normally would if there wasn't a cat in there – no need to sleep on the couch!

Setting up the room

Prepare the sanctuary room before you bring your cat home. That way they won't have to spend more time in their carrier than necessary or be frightened by you moving items into or around the room. Ensure you provide everything the cat will need. The litterbox should be on one side, with food and water far away from it. Include a variety of solo-play toys, a scratching post, several comfortable places to lie down, and elevated places on which they can climb and perch (next to a window, if possible). If the cat has arrived with any items they had in the shelter (such as towels), be sure to leave these items in the room as well as the familiar scent may be a source of comfort to them.



It is absolutely essential that you provide places for your cat to hide. Literature shows that providing cats with hiding opportunities can significantly reduce their stress¹⁻⁴. This is likely because it helps them cope with stress by concealing themselves from whatever they find threatening. Then again, many confident cats simply use them as forts. While it is crucial to provide hiding opportunities, it can also be helpful to remove access to hiding opportunities that allow cats to totally isolate themselves (such as under beds), as these can make it difficult for fearful cats to learn that you're not such a threat after all.



Transitioning beyond the sanctuary room

Day 1

When your cat first arrives home, place their carrier in the sanctuary room. Open the carrier door and see how your cat reacts. If your cat is displaying fearful behaviour, such as staying in their carrier or immediately hiding somewhere else in the room, you should leave them alone in their room for their first day in their new home. This allows them the freedom to roam and explore at their own pace. If your cat seeks interaction from you at all when you open the carrier door, you should reinforce this behaviour with treats, and visit with them several more times that evening.

Day 2 until release from sanctuary room

Anytime you visit your cat or use the room while they are in the sanctuary room, move slowly and quietly, and bring them something they enjoy – such as catnip, a toy, or a treat. This keeps the interactions positive and creates a positive association with your presence for your cat. Do not force an interaction such as petting on your cat before they are comfortable. If they come to you for attention, then provide some light petting around their head. If they respond positively, by leaning in or purring, then continue petting.

Release from sanctuary room

Before you release your cat from their sanctuary room, make sure the rest of your home is set up to welcome your new feline. Just as in the sanctuary room, provide hiding places and perches where possible, as well as ensuring any potential hazards, such as toxic plants, are out of reach.

Once your cat has stopped hiding while you are in the sanctuary room, leave the door to the sanctuary room open so your cat can explore their new home when they feel comfortable to do so, but retreat to their safe space if they feel the need to. It is important to leave the sanctuary room set up with all of your cat's essentials, as too much change too quickly may cause stress for your cat.

Ending the sanctuary room

Once your cat is spending more time out of their sanctuary room, then you can officially end the sanctuary room process. This involves moving the items in the sanctuary room, such as the litterbox and food dishes, to the place you prefer them to be in your home.

Tips:

- Be patient! It may take your new cat anywhere from days to weeks for them to fully settle into their new home. Rushing the process will only damage your relationship in the long-term.
- Provide a calm household during this transition. Put off having houseguests over or throwing a party until your cat has fully settled in.
- If your cat is particularly fearful, try hanging out in the sanctuary room while focused on something other than your cat. Sit in the room and read a book or do some work on your computer. This allows your cat to get used to your presence in a low-pressure way and shows them that you are not a threat.

