

Cats from a Hoarding Situation

We've all heard the tragic stories about animal hoarders living with more than the typical number of pets in conditions that do not meet their standard requirements for care (such as nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary)¹. While our first instinct can be to be angry at animal hoarders, this behaviour is often rooted in good intentions but conditions slowly got out of hand – either by “saving” more animals than they have the ability to care for, or by unintentionally allowing their existing animals to breed. Often



the sheer number of animals and uncontrolled breeding can mean the animals are not properly socialized to humans when they are young, resulting in them having difficulty trusting humans later in life. Cats are the most commonly hoarded species². With extra care and patience, providing a home for a cat from a hoarding situation can be incredibly rewarding.

What to Expect

Not all cats from hoarding situations will behave the same. However, they will likely have different needs than a typical cat, due to their less-than-typical background.

Change is scary!

Cats from a hoarding environment may find change more stressful than typical cats. They have lived in one environment their entire lives with limited human interaction and have likely never left the home. They have likely never been in a cat carrier, visited the vet, or had a clean litterbox to use – everything about their new life will be new to them. Take it slow with these cats and follow the tips below.

Cat-to-human relationships

These cats can show a wide range of behaviours when it comes to their interactions with humans. Some of these cats can be extremely affectionate! Others who have had limited positive experience with humans, can display undersocial behaviours – meaning they may be instinctively fearful of humans and can become overwhelmed by even limited human interaction. Others may be comfortable with your presence and some handling, but may never be a typical ‘lap cat’ who seeks out affection and attention. See [Undersocial Cats](#) for more information!

Cat-to-cat relationships

Cats from a hoarding situation typically get along very well with other cats, since they have spent a lot of time in large groups of them. This does not guarantee that your new cat will get along with your existing cat, so a proper introduction will be needed to increase the likelihood of a friendly relationship. See [Introducing Your New Cat to Your Resident Cat](#) for more information!



How to help your new cat

The sanctuary room

Cats that came from a hoarding situation need a slow and gradual introduction to their new home. Setting up a sanctuary room in your home and allowing your cat the time it needs to be comfortable is essential to creating a trusting relationship. See [The Sanctuary Room](#) for more information.

Watch body language

It is crucial that you learn to identify when your cat is fearful and respond appropriately. If your cat is exhibiting signs of fear when you approach them (such as big pupils, tense posture, or hiding), reduce the intensity of your interaction and respect their personal space. This may mean you need to sit back a bit, but it might mean to leave your cat alone entirely. See [Feline Body Language](#) for more information.

Desensitizing and counter-conditioning

It may be possible to increase your cat's tolerance for things that frighten them (such as being touched) through a process called desensitization and counter-conditioning. This means gradually exposing an animal to something it doesn't like and pairing this with food. This process can change an animal's perception of something from bad to good. Ensure this process is done so slowly that your cat does not go above their threshold and exhibit fearful behaviours.

Provide a regular routine

Research shows that a regular routine can reduce stress in cats³. If cats know when to anticipate certain activities, this can reduce the anxiety caused by uncertainty over what will happen next. Ensure you provide events that are important to your cat (meals, play, training, etc.) at consistent times of day.

Enrich your home

Enrichment helps to ensure a cat is provided with everything they need to exhibit their normal range of behaviours – this includes behaviours that might help them cope with fear or stress. It is important to provide perching and hiding opportunities for fearful cats so that they can feel safe in a high place or hide themselves from a perceived threat. It can also be helpful to remove access to hiding opportunities that allow cats to totally isolate themselves (such as under beds), as it can be difficult for isolated cats to learn that you're not such a threat after all. See [Enriching Your Home](#) for more information!

Play therapy and trick training

Play is a healthy behaviour that cats love to perform. Importantly, it can help reduce their stress. Consider training your cat tricks as well. Clicker training uses positive reinforcement and gives the cat a feeling of control over the interaction, which is VERY useful in reducing stress in cats. See [Trick Training Your Cat](#) for more information! Both playing with your cat and training them to do tricks are especially fantastic strategies for bonding with a cat that does not like to be touched.



Carrier training

For owners of cats prone to fear, getting their cat into a carrier can be particularly troublesome. Carrier training can be especially valuable in this context. This process gives your cat a “safe” place to hide in the home, and also ensures that getting your cat into the carrier when necessary will be less stressful for both cat and owner. See *Training Cats to Love Their Carriers* for more information!

Pheromone therapy

Feliway™ is a synthetic feline facial pheromone thought to have a calming effect on cats. There is some debate as to whether or not it works⁴, but some owners claim that it has had a profound impact on reducing their cat's fear.

Do not punish

It is very important that you do not punish this behaviour. This will strengthen your cat's fear, reduce the likelihood your cat will exhibit warning signs in advance of this behaviour, and elevate the intensity of the reaction in the future.

References:

¹HARC (2002). Health implications of animal hoarding. *Health and Social Work*, 27, 125-131.

²Patronek, G. J. (1999). Hoarding of animals: an under-recognized public health problem in a difficult-to-study population. *Public health reports*, 114(1), 81.

³Carlstead, K., Brown, J. L., & Strawn, W. (1993). Behavioral and physiological correlates of stress in laboratory cats. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 38(2), 143-158.

⁴Frank, D., Beauchamp, G., & Palestini, C. (2010). Systematic review of the use of pheromones for treatment of undesirable behavior in cats and dogs. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 236(12), 1308-1316.

