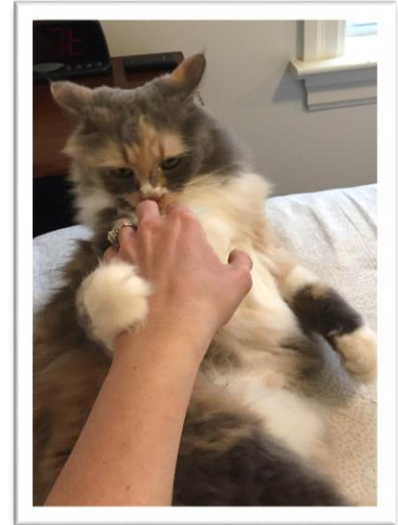


## Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning to Touch Behaviour Modification Plan

Cats can be wary of touch for a number of reasons, but most often it frightens them or they find it physically uncomfortable or painful. If there is reason to believe touch may cause a cat physical discomfort or pain, it is essential that they see a veterinarian immediately. The cause may range from fleas to a serious injury. However, barring a medical cause (or even, in association with medical treatment), there are some techniques that can be used to help a cat learn to enjoy touch. Desensitization and counterconditioning refers to gradually introducing a cat to something they do not enjoy in association with something they do enjoy (most often, food or play).



### Breaking down the steps

Use the following steps to desensitize and counter-condition your cat to enjoy touch. Please also see the video “Socializing Lennon” to help you visualize some of these steps. It is wise to perform this technique daily right before a regular mealtime, so that your cat is hungry and more motivated to participate.

1. **Eating off stick.** Put a teaspoon of Heinz Chicken with Broth baby food on the end of a long stick. Offer the food end of the stick to your cat (holding the far end of the stick with your hand). If the cat eats the food, slowly pull back the stick and load it with another teaspoon of food. If the cat eats the food 3 times in a row, proceed to Step 2.
2. **Reducing distance between hand and cat.** Continue to offer food off the stick a teaspoon at a time, but reduce the distance between the food and your hand, by choking up on the stick a couple of inches before offering. Stay at this distance until the cat eats the food 3 times in a row, then choke up on the stick a few more inches before the next time you offer it. Repeat until the cat will eat off the stick 3 times in a row with your hand right next to the food. Proceed to Step 3.



3. **Feeding off hand.** Offer food from your hand. Once the cat will eat off your hand 3 times in a row, proceed to Step 4.
4. **Getting second hand close to cat.** Offer food from your hand, while simultaneously extending your second hand 12 inches from the side of their head. At first the presence of your second hand may make them wary about eating, so give them a little extra time. Once the cat has eaten the food, withdraw both hands at the same time. Once the cat eats the food 3 times in a row with your second time at that distance, present your second hand a few inches closer next time. Repeat until the cat will eat off your hand 3 times in a row with your second hand 3 inches away from their head. Proceed to Step 5.
5. **Starting to move second hand.** Offer food from your hand, while simultaneously extending your second hand 3 inches from the side of their head, then begin to slowly move your second hand around their head. Once the cat will eat off your hand 3 times in a row while you are moving your second hand around their head, proceed to Step 6.
6. **Starting to touch cat.** Continue to offer food off your hand while simultaneously extending your second hand to the side of their head, but this time lightly touch the side of their head with your second hand. They are likely to startle the first time you touch them, if so, keep still if possible and hopefully they will go back to eating. As they become more comfortable with your touch on future attempts, gradually increase the duration and pressure of the petting on the side of their face. Once you are sure they truly enjoy petting (e.g., pushing into your hand) 3 times in a row, proceed to Step 7.
7. **Weaning off need for food.** Offer only your second hand and pet the cat. If they enjoy it, rotate between offering food and not offering food during attempts. Keep petting sessions short at first, gradually extend duration of petting. If they are spooked or do not enjoy it, go back a few steps.



## Tips

- For the stick in steps 1-2, try a backscratcher, a long wooden dowel, a kitchen utensil with a long handle, or a target stick (the video features a Klik Stik).
- Heinz Chicken with Broth baby food has been recommended in this method, but use whatever gooey food your cat likes best! Consider trying wet food, plain yogurt, mayonnaise, or something with a similar consistency.
- Let your cat guide your pace. If they start showing signs of fear, anxiety, or stress, take things a bit slower. This is important for your safety, your cat's comfort, and will help ensure quicker progress overall. As a general rule, you can use eating as a sign of consent; if they are comfortable enough to eat, they are usually under their threshold.
- Do not attempt to touch your cat outside of this protocol, or you will lose the trust you are gaining.
- If your cat is not fearful of your presence (just of touch) you may progress through the first few steps very quickly. If your cat is fearful of your presence altogether, you may have to spend some time getting them comfortable with you before they will eat anything. Starting with THS's Positive Association BMOD plan may be wise in this case.
- If you see anything that indicates your cat is in pain, contact a veterinarian ASAP.

## Bonus Method!

For some cats, seeing your hand coming is the scariest part of the process. For them, the method listed above may prove extra difficult. In these cases, try the method below – it aims to get them to enjoy the *feeling* of touch without seeing the hand. As with the method above, the eating can help you gauge the cat's level of comfort and help develop a positive association, but in this method the food also serves as a distraction and keeps the cat's eyes/mind off your hand. For some cats, a toy can be used in place of the food.

1. **Feeding next to you.** Sit on the floor and offer the cat's bowl of food close to you. Ideally, you should position it in a way that the cat's head is facing away from you. Once the cat is comfortable eating next to you 3 meals in a row, proceed to Step 2.
2. **Introducing gentle touch.** Feed the cat in the same way as Step 1, but this time gently (and briefly) touch the cat around the top of head or shoulders with your fingers. It is very likely that the cat will startle and turn to look at your hand on your first few

attempts. If so, keep as still as possible and hopefully they will go back to eating. If they flee, return to Step 1 and repeat for another week before trying Step 2. If they go back to eating, wait a few moments and try touch again. Repeat until the cat will continue eating while you are giving them brief, gentle touches around the top of the head or shoulders, then gradually increase the duration and pressure of the touch to this area. Once you can pet them with relatively normal pressure for a few seconds at a time without them hesitating to eat, proceed to Step 3.

- 3. Begin touching face.** Pet them around the top of their head or shoulders while they are eating, but gradually move your fingers down to the side of their face, focusing on places where the cat has facial glands. Once you are sure they truly enjoy petting on the side of their face (e.g., pushing into your hand) 3 times in a row, proceed to Step 4.



- 4. Continue petting after eating.** Extend the periods of petting the side of the cat's face (discontinuing if they stop showing signs of enjoyment), even after they stop eating. Once they enjoy petting for a significant period of time (e.g., 30 seconds) after eating, proceed to Step 5 (but continue conducting Step 4 regularly).
- 5. Pet at other times when they can't see your hand.** Start trying to pet them at other times when they cannot see your hand coming (e.g., when they are focused on a toy). Again, it is likely that they will startle the first few times you attempt this, so follow the same instructions provided in Step 2. Once they are comfortable with petting in these situations, proceed to Step 6.
- 6. Allow them to see your hand when petting.** Try petting at times when they can see your hand, but be sure to start with situations in which they are relaxed (e.g., they are just waking up/falling asleep). Move slowly and focus on areas where the cat has shown the most enjoyment. If they show signs of fear, anxiety, or stress (e.g., dilated pupils) they may not be ready and you should return to Step 5. If they enjoy it, gradually begin attempting this at times when the cat is more alert.

