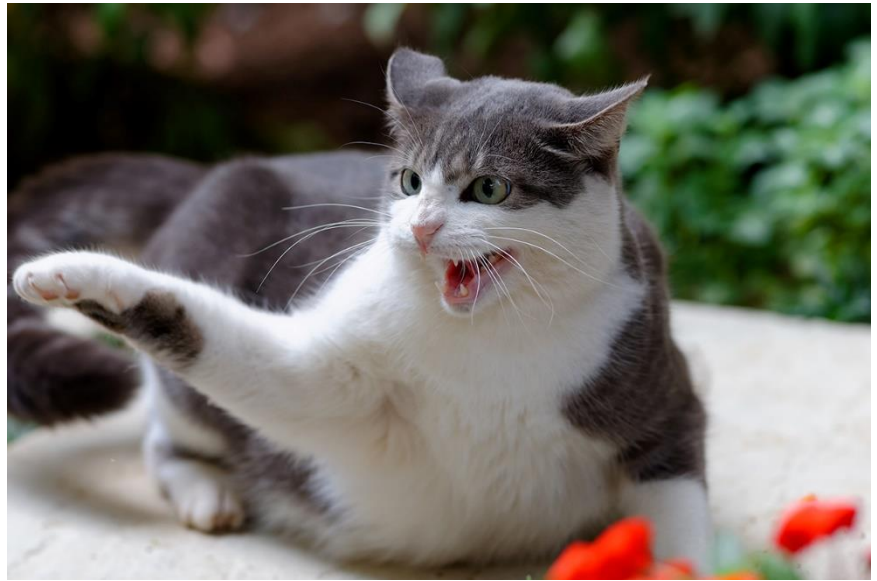


Fear Aggression

When an animal encounters something they perceive to be a threat, their general response is fight, flight, or freeze. Responding aggressively to fear is more likely when opportunities to flee are reduced. Aggression in the face of fear (sometimes called defensive aggression) is totally normal, but some cats are more likely to show this response based on their genetics or previous experiences that showed them that this response achieves their desired result (i.e., the threat went away).



Visit your veterinarian

If your cat is fearful (regardless of whether or not aggression occurs), a trip to the veterinarian might be warranted. This is especially true if the behaviour is new, occurs in old age, or presents with signs of pain (including changes in litter box behaviour, such as diarrhea, peeing more often, or out-of-box elimination). Behaviour medications may be recommended to help manage event-based stress or chronic anxiety.

Reducing the behaviour

If no medical cause is found, there are several strategies you can use to reduce or eliminate fear and the associated aggression.

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. In multi-cat homes it is also important to provide multiples of each resource (litter boxes, resting places, food bowls, etc.) and to make sure that key areas or resources have multiple access points (to ensure cats always have the option to flee), especially if there is any tension in the relationship between cats. See [Enriching Your Home](#) for more information!

Provide a regular routine

Research shows that a regular routine can reduce stress in cats¹. 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.



Watch body language

It is crucial that you learn to identify when your cat is fearful, and respond appropriately. Signs can vary between cats, but common ones are included below. See [Feline Body Language](#) for more information!

- Large pupils
- Ears to the side/back
- Tail tucked/tight to body
- Hissing/growling/yowling
- Hair standing on end
- Leaning away/crouching/tense body posture
- Rolling on back with feet ready to strike, or feet tucked under with paws on the ground, ready to flee

Modify your interaction style

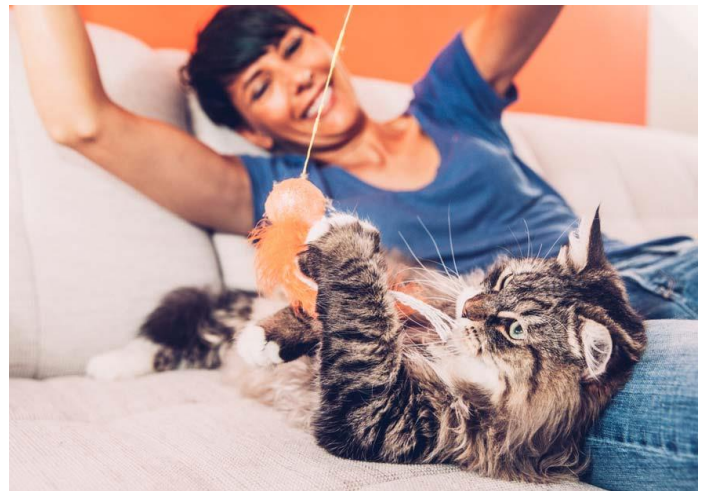
If your cat is exhibiting signs of fear, reduce the intensity of your interaction and respect their personal space. This may mean you need to sit back a bit, but it might mean to leave your cat alone entirely. Always use a considerate approach with cats prone to fear: turn your body sideways, get small, limit eye contact, verbalize soothingly and gesture enticingly. Grow your “reinforcement bank account” by frequently giving your cat little treats to improve the association they have with you. Make sure all people in the household are aware of these techniques for interaction (ESPECIALLY children). It’s important to remember that they are not exhibiting this behaviour because they are “mean,” but because they are afraid.

Desensitization and counter-conditioning

Try to identify what things that frighten your cat (e.g., men, the vacuum, other pets), and gradually introduce them to these things in combination with something they like (e.g., treats or play). Ensure the introduction is done so slowly that your cat does not go above their threshold (i.e., they do not exhibit fearful behaviours).

Train tricks

Trick training can be a fantastic way to increase a cat’s confidence. It can also be very useful in teaching a cat new escape routes that can be used when they are experiencing fear. See [Trick Training Your Cat](#) for more information!

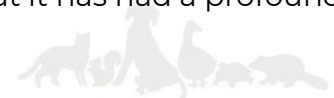


Carrier training

For owners of cats prone to being aggressive when frightened, 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 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 works², but some owners claim that it has had a profound impact on reducing their cat’s fear.



If an attack occurs

If your cat is experiencing fear and responds with aggression, it is important that you stay calm. Make sure that an escape route is available to your cat. If they continue to pursue you, block their access to you with a thick blanket. If your cat has latched on to you and won't let go, try to wrap them in the thick blanket and use calm but firm pressure to dislodge them. If necessary, use a loud noise to startle them. Next, place or usher them into a darkened, quiet room and give them time to calm down. This may only take a few minutes, but often takes much longer.

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:

¹Carlstead, K., Brown, J. L., & Strawn, W. (1993). Behavioral and physiological correlates of stress in laboratory cats. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 38(2), 143-158.

²Frank, D., Beauchamp, G., & Palestrini, 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.

