

## Fearful Cat

It's normal for all cats to be fearful every now and then. However, some cats are prone to being fearful far more easily. This tendency may be because the cat was not properly socialized when they were young, because they had a bad experience in the past, or simply because they have a shy temperament. The intensity of and trigger for fearful behaviours can vary a great deal between cats, largely due to these reasons. Fortunately, there are several techniques that can be used to help reduce your cat's fear, regardless of the cause.



### Visit your veterinarian

If your cat is fearful, 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). A medical cause for the fear may be found, or 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 help your cat to become less fearful.

### 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 cats<sup>1</sup>. 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).



## Recognize triggers and be proactive

Try to identify what things frighten your cat, and do what you can to limit their exposure to them. If these things are nonessential and can be removed from your home (e.g., a Big Mouth Billy Bass), this is often easiest. For things that are unavoidable but infrequent (e.g., having a group of friends over), it is wise to provide a safe environment where they can stay until they are gone. See [The Sanctuary Room](#) for more information!

## Desensitization and counter-conditioning

For triggers that are unavoidable or frequent (e.g., other pets in the home) 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 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 works<sup>2</sup>, 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.

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**References:**

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

<sup>2</sup>Frank, 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.

