

Helping Your Fearful Cat

A cat that is shy, fearful, or wary may also have other behavior issues as diverse as aggression, litter box issues, or conflict with other pets. Plus, they aren't living their happiest life. Cats don't "get over" fear by being forced to repeatedly experience the fear. They need your help to change their emotional reactions.

Little Steps: Desensitization

In order to change their emotions, a cat needs to be able to think and learn. When they are very fearful or reacting strongly, they aren't able to do this. To let your cat learn that something is safe, they need to be protected from being overwhelmed or scared by it. Each time your cat reacts negatively, they are further cementing their fear or dislike of that person, pet, or situation.

Desensitization is the process of slowly exposing your cat to something that would normally scare them but at a level that doesn't cause that fearful reaction. For example, if your cat is scared when your dog comes within 5 feet, you would start with the dog at 10 feet. As your cat becomes comfortable at this level, you very slowly increase the intensity of the scary thing, always letting your cat adjust and learn without fear or negative emotions.

Takeaways about Desensitization:

- Start with a mild form of the scary thing: a quiet noise, a lot of distance, a short time, etc.
- Your cat should never have a negative reaction. Watch their body language for subtle signs.
- Slowly increase the intensity of the scary thing while staying under the cat's threshold for reacting.

Make It Good: Counterconditioning

Desensitization by itself can be a very slow process; adding "counterconditioning" can speed things up. Counterconditioning is pairing a scary or uncomfortable thing with something that your cat really loves and anticipates getting. This could be food, special treats, play time, or attention from a favorite person. Every time your cat is around the person, pet, or situation that could cause them to react, they receive their "good thing." Over time, the scary thing starts to mean the good thing is coming. This causes the positive emotions associated with the good thing to get linked to the (previously) scary thing as well.

The food or play isn't a distraction or bribe. In order to teach your cat a new emotional response, it must come *after* your cat becomes aware of the scary or uncomfortable situation, not before. For example, if you clip one of your cat's nails and then give a treat, you are counterconditioning them to nail trims. If you instead try to give them treats to distract them while you trim their nails, you aren't. While distraction may work for some cats, if your cat is very uncomfortable with something, a distraction won't help. They may actually learn to avoid you when those treats come out because they now connect them to scary nail trims (they've been counter-conditioned in the opposite way).

Takeaways about Counterconditioning:

- Identify something that your cat really loves and will anticipate (food, play, attention, etc.)
- Pair every experience with that good thing, while controlling the intensity of the scary thing,
- Order matters - make sure the good thing always comes AFTER the scary thing

Troubleshooting

Changing your cat's emotional reactions can be a tricky process as there are several key points that have to be done correctly. You may benefit from having a professional help you create and implement a plan. If you are trying to work on the situation by yourself and having issues, these are the most common challenges:

Your Cat Won't Take the Treat or Play:

If your cat won't accept their "good thing," there could be a couple of issues. First, the treat or toy may not be good enough for the cat in this situation. Try wet food, meat-flavored baby food (no onions or garlic), whipped cream, or bits of canned tuna to really get them excited for their treat.

The other problem might be that the scary or uncomfortable thing is too close, too intense, or in some way too much for your cat. If a cat is fearful or stressed, they won't be able to enjoy their good thing and the counterconditioning won't work. Look for a way to decrease the intensity of the scary thing so your cat can relax a bit.

Your Cat Continues to Have a Fearful or Aggressive Reaction:

If your cat is having a negative reaction during your counterconditioning sessions, slow down. They can't learn if they are reacting so you need to make the situation less scary or less uncomfortable in some way. Also make sure you are offering the good thing after the cat notices the thing that scares them. If the treat comes first, they might be distracted but won't be learning anything.

Alternatively, if your cat is reacting at other times than when you are working on the counterconditioning, you need to use management to protect them from the thing that is scaring them. If they are continuing to be confronted with something that is causing a negative emotional response, they will never be able to let go of that fear. Keep other pets or kids away, create safe zones with hiding places, or otherwise help your cat feel safe.

Your Cat is Okay Only to a Certain Point:

During this process you are trying to slowly build your cat up so they can handle the person, pet, or situation that they are scared of. It is likely that you will come to a point where you have trouble getting closer, staying longer, or otherwise making the situation more intense. In this case, try to break the steps down further so things are only getting a tiny bit harder. Also consider how a combination of different factors like distance, time, or other conditions can interact. For example, your cat is ok with two nails being trimmed but not three. It might be that they are also uncomfortable being held for a longer time and that is part of the problem. In that case, you would build up the length of time that you hold your cat separately from the nail trimming.

Silicon Valley Pet Project is here to help! Visit our website at www.svpetproject.org or email us at info@svpetproject.org.

This material was written in collaboration with cat behavior consultant Jessica Char. Learn more at www.FelineEngineering.com.