

Bringing home a shy or fearful cat



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A shy cat is one who has a stronger fear response than other more social cats. As cats are both predator and prey on the food chain, meeting new situations with a combination of curiosity and fear is a normal response. Shy can simply be the cat's personality or it could be the result of a negative experience with a person, a lack of socialization during the first 8 weeks of life, or it could be partially inherited. Numerous studies have shown that kittens inherit at least part of their attitude toward humans from their mother. It is possible that over time your cat may lose their shyness as they gain confidence, or they may not.

For prey animals, a great deal of their sense of safety comes from knowing every exit and hiding spot in their environment. This is why new environments are VERY stressful for most cats. When a prey animal is frightened, this is a survival level fear akin to what a person experiences a few seconds after their brain realizes a car accident is about to happen.

Once the cat is in a high state of alarm, it can take up to 72 hours for their stress level to drop. So the first three days in a new home are likely to be very stressful. Knowing how your cat behaved when they arrived at the shelter can tell you how they are likely to act initially in your home. Hissing, hiding, running and growling are not unusual.

While you can provide a calm presence during this 72 hour period, much of what's going on your cat needs to work through on their own. As you are also new to your cat and part of what they are struggling to adjust to.

With a shy cat it's important to start them out in a single small room of their new house so they don't become overwhelmed by the amount of unfamiliar space. This room needs to have plenty of hiding spots. Cats generally prefer hiding spots that are out of the way, like a closet or cardboard box under a chair, or up high so they can see everything going on around them. Until you know which your cat prefers, try both and see where your cat chooses to be. Before you bring your cat into the room, block off places you don't want your cat to hide.

Your cat may only emerge from their hiding spot to eat, drink, use the litter box at night, or when the house is empty for several days or more.

When interacting with a shy cat, it's best to sit nearby and let the cat explore and approach you on its own time schedule. Many cats are aware of the size difference between themselves and humans so getting on the floor or as close to the floor as you can will help. Pay attention to your cat's body language as you approach. If your cat shows signs of discomfort (Eyes dilating, ears flattening, hissing, whiskers pulled back, fidgeting, etc.) move further away. In the first few days or even weeks, there may not be any place in the cat's room where they are truly comfortable with your presence. If that's the case, put as much distance between you and your cat as you can and start there.

Simply sitting with your cat and talking to them is one of the most powerful tools you have. What you say to your cat matters less than your tone of voice and how calm you are.

Spend time just talking to your cat and if you run out of things to say, bring a book and read. As most cats are sensitive to unfamiliar sounds, make sure your phone is on silent and other potentially

scary sounds stay out of the room. Cats are also attuned to quick movements so being conscious of entering and leaving the room slowly and moving slowly will help reassure your cat.

Don't underestimate the power of gifting. Bringing your cat little gifts of a feather, treats, or some other kind of toy can go a long way in creating a friendship. The gifting also creates an association for your cat that when humans show up, good things happen.

Depending on how frightened your cat is, they may ignore your gifts completely or choose to interact when you're not around for a day, a week, or even a couple weeks. The first indication your cat is getting more comfortable in your presence may be them choosing to eat a treat in front of you.

The answer everyone wants is "How long is it going to take to befriend my shy cat?" Unfortunately there's no way to answer that question. It takes a well adjusted cat about 3 months to settle into a new home. It will likely take a shy cat longer. How much longer depends on your cats history, life experiences and temperament. It could take your shy cat months or even a year to fully settle in.

Patience is your most important tool here. Don't give up on your shy cat if it's taking longer than you expected for them to warm up. With time, patience, and understanding, you're already on the right track to creating a lasting friendship with your new feline housemate.