

# FEARFUL CATS



Your cat has an anxious and fearful temperament. Temperament in cats is determined by three factors. The first is a genetic predisposition. Some breeds are not as good at communicating with other cats or humans due to physical characteristics such as facial folds, amount of fur, or differences in the number of facial muscles. The second determination of temperament is epigenetics. Studies in dogs and humans have shown that if the mother is stressed during pregnancy, then the babies will not be able to deal as well with stress. This intolerance to stress may be passed on through multiple generations. The last contributing factor to temperament is the socialization period, which is significantly shorter than many people realize. This period lasts from 2-7 weeks in cats. Cats achieve physical maturity at around the age of 1, and from that time to when they reach social maturity between 2-3 years of age their behavior may change in association with the object of their fear.

There are four responses to fear. They are fight, flight, freeze, and fidget. Fight is aggressive behavior such as barking, lunging, growling, and biting, and is frequently misinterpreted as an expression of dominance. Dominance is an outdated way of looking at a social hierarchy that exists in wolves, and is no longer used in wolves, dogs, or cats. Flight is hiding or running away from the stimulus. Freeze is a behavior where the cat feels like it has no option but to accept what is happening. Fidget is referred to as displacement behaviors. It is a normal behavior that is taken out of context because your cat has anxious energy and doesn't know what to do with the energy. The most common displacement behaviors are urinating in locations, grooming themselves, mounting, or pacing.

There are two situations that generally cause fear and aggression related to fear in cats. The first is a threat to their resources. Resources can be food, toys, resting places, or human attention. The other situation that causes fear is behavior by humans or cats that your cat considers threatening.

Approaching your cat when he is unable to escape due to a physical barrier, exaggerated or sudden hand movements, reaching toward your cat, bending from above, or direct stares can all be provocative behavior from a person or another cat especially people or cats that your cat does not know well.



Human and cat body language are significantly different. Actions that we do not perceive to be threatening can produce a fear response in your cat, especially if performed by someone that he doesn't know well. Examples of these actions are making eye contact reaching over him, or changing body position. This can put him in an aroused state, where he is more prone to involuntary fearful behavior.

There is no good stress, stress, and bad stress, distress, and both produce the stress hormone, cortisol. Cortisol stays in the body for 1-3 days following a stressful incident, so your cat is likely to be more reactive to triggers during this time. Stressors can build up over the course of time causing your cat to react more intensely to certain stimuli than he would at other times. Please keep a close eye on your cat in the future for any medical conditions as they can affect his ability to cope with stressful situations.

It is impossible to reinforce a fear response. If your cat is acting fearfully, you can comfort him or give him treats without concern that the fearful behavior even aggression will be encouraged. It is better if you can give a treat to him before he is over threshold, as he will be better able to learn in that moment. Once he is reacting to a stimulus, there is a significantly lower chance that your cat is able to learn, so removing him from the environment is best. One of the things that can raise the baseline stress level in any cat is any type of punitive training. Many techniques in training fall into this category.

Unfortunately, this type of training is relatively common and tends to increase fear and anxiety. There are also studies that show that these training methods increase the potential for aggression to the person giving the correction and any person present or event that occurs when the correction occurs.

Anxiety in cats is treated using a combination of methods. These include avoiding the trigger of your cat's fear, training your cat to do a behavior that is incompatible with the current one, changing the environment so that your cat is able to learn and somethings, behavioral modification medication. Your cat will likely require lifelong management. Changes need to be made in the way that people interact with your cat. Making these changes will help to ensure that the potential for aggression is decreased, your cat is under better control, and improve his quality of life.