

SHY CATS

What is a Shy Cat?

Everyone's met a shy cat: they're the ones that run for cover at the sight of visitors, or skulk around the edges of a room and never really come out into the open. They're cats who spend more time under the bed or in the cupboard than out exploring the world.

A shy cat will frequently spend days hiding when first introduced to a new environment. In most cases, if left to their own devices they will come out in their own time, but often their behaviour will cause their owners great anxiety.



Some may think the cat is unfriendly or antisocial - others may even try to encourage the cat to interact by dragging him or her out of their hiding place in an effort to prove that there is nothing to worry about.

The problem is that for a shy cat, this is the very worst thing you can do and is guaranteed to have a very negative effect on the cat. This may be as instantaneous as hissing and swiping or as long ranging as inappropriate toileting and other signs of stress.

Why are Cats Shy?

It is very difficult to answer this question, because the reasons can vary so greatly, but the short answer is: they are afraid. They are not confident animals and may not have the skills to cope with some situations. How they came to be like this can only be determined by a behavioural consultant after a detailed history and even then may be nothing more than an educated guess.

Understanding that they are afraid is the first step. It will help you determine the steps you can take to help your cat adjust and cope, or even gain confidence. If you are concerned about your shy cat, you should seek advice from our Behaviour Helpline on (07) 3426 9928 or a professional behavioural consultant.

How to Move a Shy Cat

Whenever you are introducing a shy cat into a new environment, either because you have moved house or because you have acquired a new shy cat, it is important to let the cat adjust in his or her own time.

Before releasing the cat from its transport box, choose a room they can inhabit and set the room up with litter trays, food, water, toys, bedding and of course a few places to hide. Release the cat into this room by opening the box, and then quietly depart, shutting the door behind you. Leave the cat to familiarise itself in its new surroundings for at minimum one hour before entering the room again.

The cat should be allowed to stay in this room for at least a week before any effort is made to introduce it to the rest of the house. When the time has come to let the cat try exploring some new territory, simply open the door to the room and walk away. Allow the cat to emerge from the room if and when he or she is ready to do so.

Most shy cats will emerge cautiously, moving around the walls of the room and behind the furniture, their movements slow and their body held quite low to the ground. Their eyes will be wide open. Do not try to interact with your cat - pretend you can't see them until they let you know they are ready to interact with you by approaching you.

If the cat vocalises from within a hiding place - under a bed or behind a sofa for example, feel free to speak to the cat quietly and calmly.

Once the cat has entered the main house, encourage confidence and positive associations by tempting it with particularly delicious treats such as slightly warmed roast chicken.



How to Help Your Shy Cat Adjust

The most vital thing you can do for your shy cat is let the cat adjust at his or her own pace. Don't ever try and force it. Instead, offer ways for them to adjust.

You may like to try using a pheromone diffuser to help your cat feel more comfortable. These are usually available from your local vet.

Cats love climbing and having access to high up places. This is part of their natural behaviour and helps them cope with stress. Help the cat adjust by providing lots of high resting places by placing bedding or boxes on top of cupboards, and place at least one hiding place in every room. You may like to introduce a tall scratch pole that has a high rest at the top and a hiding box at the bottom. The higher the rest at the top, the more likely the cat will be to use it.

There should be **at least one "safe zone"** or somewhere the cat can go where they know they will not be disturbed. When the cat is in this hiding place, you should pretend you can't see it and don't know where it is - never approach a cat in its "safe zone" and **never** try to remove it. Everyone enjoys a little time out every now and then and this is your cat's version. Your cat will feel more secure and confident knowing they have a place they can go where they are safe and will be left alone.

Providing your cat with some form of access to the world outside is important. This can be provided in several ways including: a view out of a window or by having a secure outdoor play enclosure. Several companies make these types of enclosures that provide a safe and fun outdoor area for cats. Most shy cats are happier being indoor cats, but safe and controlled outdoor areas can help raise their confidence and therefore their coping skills. Most importantly, you can help your cat gain confidence by providing interactive and thought provoking indoor activities. By encouraging your cat to solve simple problems that increase in difficulty as the cat's skills improve, you will help your cat feel more confident and foster a better relationship with your feline friend.

Importantly, the value of "play therapy" cannot be overstated. Encouraging playful interaction with you by dangling an inviting toy on the end of a string or rolling a wad of paper with an aromatic and tasty treat inside down a hallway will go a long way towards fostering a closer relationship between you and your cat, as well as help increase your cat's confidence.

For more information on indoor activities and ideas for play, please see our fact sheet "Entertaining Your Feline Friend".