



Confidence Building for Cats

Cats coming into a new home may be very scared of all the noises, new people, sights, smells, routines, and other animals (if you have any). We can use this protocol to help them ease into their new routine and help them realize that the world isn't as scary as they might think.

This handbook is designed to be easy to access, meaning you don't need to be an animal or behavior professional to understand the information or perform the training protocols in it. The second section does go over some technical terms to help you understand the techniques and mechanisms at play.

Regardless of your experience as a cat parent, if this is your first cat, your 100th cat, if you've worked with fearful cats before or not, remember that behavior is fluid and it can and will change from day to day. One day you may think you're headed for a breakthrough and the next it seems like your cat is acting more fearful than ever before. That's ok. Just like with people, our mood and tolerance changes day to day. At various points in your training you may feel frustrated or defeated or that you have failed your cat, and that's completely normal. Take a break and come back to it later. Just know that your cat is trying the best and their hardest, just like you are, and nothing that they are or are not doing comes from spite, being mad at you, or being stubborn.



If you need further assistance with your cat, please contact us at behavior@alexandriaanimals.org and we will be happy to help!

Creating a Safe Haven

A safe haven, or acclimation room, is an important place for your cat to have and the first step to be taken when introducing your cat to the new home. A safe haven can be a place to help fearful cats feel more comfortable, give reactive or high arousal cats a temporary place to be removed from triggers, or just a place that your cat can go to during the day when they feel like being alone. **It is also essential for shy or fearful cats to be introduced to new homes gradually, so a safe haven space is a very important part of a cat adjusting to a new home.**

Creating a Safe Haven

Create an area for your cat to go to that enables them to be able to remove themselves and be alone (or adjust to a new environment a little at a time so they are not so overwhelmed by the entire home). The area should be somewhere that is quiet and more removed from the rest of the home, and should be a very comfortable, low traffic space. Most cats like smaller, enclosed spaces and feel safer there as well. It

should include things such as a bed, pillows, toys, a litter box, and places to hide, as well as food and water. Ideally, food, water, bedding, and bathroom area (litter box) should all be **as far apart as possible**—when litter boxes and/or beds are too close to food and/or water (or even when water is too close to food!), it can be stressful for cats. When introducing cats to the new safe haven space, give them lots of treats and feed them incrementally to help build a positive association with the space.

The most important thing about a safe haven is that there is *no large furniture to hide under or behind*. If they are able to get underneath or behind something like a washer/drier, bed, couch, inside or behind cabinets, or plumbing, they often become even **more** fearful over time as they feel trapped and helpless (not to mention they can become scared or traumatized by sudden loud noises from dishwashers/washing machines/driers!). Instead, **block off all these areas** and provide them with hidey holes like boxes or covered cat beds instead. Having resting and hiding areas throughout the area will encourage your cat to explore and be comfortable within their space.

For Fearful Cats

Many fearful cats will benefit from having a safe haven to be able to have space to remove themselves if/when they feel overwhelmed. This could be during a thunderstorm, when there are new and unfamiliar people over, if there's a lot of activity in the home, or any time that the cat is feeling stressed. Follow the guidelines above for making the space comfortable and helping your fearful cat acclimate to their safe haven. Once they have acclimated to this space, keep access to it open for them at all times, and you will see they should start going to it on their own when needed.

For Reactive or High Arousal Cats

Creating a safe haven can also be a key part of a reactive or high arousal cat's management within the home. If your cat is reactive to certain stimuli, it can sometimes be impossible or impractical to avoid their triggers, such as novel people coming to the home, children, people at the door, etc. If/When these triggers occur, lead your cat to their safe haven, ideally before they begin reacting. For example, you might set your cat up in their safe haven before your guests even come over. When in their safe haven, either give your cat their meal, or give them treats via a puzzle toy, or give them toys that they will play with by themselves. You want to set them up to be able to keep themselves entertained and busy the entire time they're in the safe haven, if they do not fall asleep while they are there.

Desensitization and Classical Conditioning

Desensitization is the process by which an animal becomes **less affected** by a stimulus. Your cat may benefit from desensitization training if they become stressed, fearful, or overstimulated by, for instance, other people, animals, sights, sounds, situations, grooming/handling, etc. Through systematic desensitization, you can help your cat become less stimulated by or fearful of specific events or actions that would prompt undesirable behavior.

1. Establish at what point your cat becomes distressed by the stimulus and begin exposing them to it **just below** that point, where they are showing no reaction yet (they may not even be aware of its presence yet). For example, if your cat is fearful of thunder or fireworks, find a recording of them and play it at a quiet enough volume that the cat is not showing any signs of distress yet. If your cat is fearful of other cats or people, have the cat/person at a distance away from your cat so that they can see them but is not showing any signs of stress yet.
 - a. The most common signs of stress in cats are:
 - i. Ears going down or back
 - ii. Dilated eyes
 - iii. Back arching/body crouching
 - iv. Hissing, growling, swatting, biting

2. Continue exposing your cat to the stimulus for several days (or even more, depending on the cat's reaction) at the same level of intensity.
3. Gradually increase the intensity of the stimulus (by moving closer to it, staying in place longer, turning up the volume on a recording, etc.) in increments so small that the animal does not even detect. For desensitization, allow the animal to carry out and engage in normal behaviors. No action is required on our part with this process, as the goal is simply to expose your cat to increasing levels of the stimulus so slowly that they don't even notice they're being exposed to them, until it blends into part of the surrounding environment and your cat no longer reacts to it.
 - a. If the situation allows it, you can give your cat their favorite enrichment (catnip, food puzzle, etc.), play their favorite game, play calming music (classical music has been proven to have a calming effect on cats and dogs), or use a Feliway plug in/spray at least during the desensitization process.

Counterconditioning (using classical conditioning to create a new emotional response to a trigger) is often paired with desensitization, as counterconditioning will effectively desensitize an animal to a stimulus, but counterconditioning goes one step further and creates a **new association** with the stimulus (a stimulus that was previously scary to the cat is now exciting). The key difference with counterconditioning is that we are actively **changing the cat's mind about how they feel about a certain stimulus by giving them something that they like while exclusively in the presence of the stress-inducing stimulus**. This forms a positive association with the stimulus to replace the negative one.

1. First, it is critical for counter conditioning that you have identified your cat's highest-value reinforcer, and that they do not have access to it outside of each training session.
2. Begin in a quiet, non-distracting environment if possible, where your cat is otherwise comfortable and relaxed. Determine at what intensity of the stimulus your cat begins to show any signs of distress. You should be as far away from the trigger as possible, or in a situation where the trigger is at the lowest intensity you can possibly get it.
3. Begin giving the high value treats the moment your cat sees or hears the stimulus but is not reacting. If they react immediately and you have no time to get the treats to them, try engaging your cat with play or treats before the stimulus so that they are more likely to be in a positive mindset when exposed to the stimulus. If your cat is still reacting as soon as the stimulus is present, just try to find the point where they show the least amount of stress/fear and start from there. **The most important part of desensitization is finding the correct starting point so that you can increase the intensity systematically.**
 - a. Some examples of starting desensitization set-ups:
 - i. If your cat is fearful of people, other animals, or certain spaces: start far enough away that your cat **is able to eat or play**.
 - ii. If your cat is fearful of sounds: start by playing a recording of the sounds at the **lowest** volume your cat can hear
 - iii. If your cat is fearful of a crate: start with just rewarding the cat for being **near** the crate
4. Remove the stimulus (move away or have the stimulus go out of sight) and stop giving your cat treats.
5. After a minute, introduce the stimulus again and repeat the exact same procedure several times.
6. When your cat is expectantly looking to you for treats when they see/hear the stimulus or enters a stressful situation and shows no signs of distress, it is time to increase the intensity of the stimulus (get closer, play the sound louder, stay in the situation longer, etc.) by the **smallest amount possible** (one second, one inch/foot, etc.)—before your cat becomes uncomfortable again and starts showing signs of stress.
7. Now repeat several times again.
 - a. If, at any time your cat begins to show fearful behaviors, you should go back to the

intensity that you were last successful with and repeat more.

- Repeat steps 1-4, gradually increasing the intensity of the stimulus with each session until it is at the desired intensity (usually the intensity at which the stimulus will be encountered in your cat's daily life). You can only go as fast as your cat will allow. If you try to go too fast, you may end up **sensitizing** them to the stimulus, which will cause them to be **more** afraid and create more work for yourself and them.
- ALWAYS end each training session with success! Give a jackpot reward—playtime, favorite enrichment, etc.—after sessions to maximize your cat's excitement for learning!

Note

- D/CC training is all about building a **new** response to a distressing stimulus. As such, all exposure to the stimulus you are attempting to desensitize/counter condition your cat to must be done in a controlled way, and only during training sessions, during the training process. If you progress too quickly, or your cat is exposed to the fearful stimulus in a non-controlled way and has a negative reaction, it will likely set you back. Once a cat is in this type of situation, you have swapped from management/training to damage control, and the only goal is to get your cat out of the situation with as little damage done as possible.

Conditioning a Fearful Cat to Your Presence

- Approach your cat and drop treats near them.
- After dropping treats, walk away and out of the cat's sight for approximately 10 seconds.
- Return and repeat the process for a total of 5 times per session.
 - If your cat does not eat the treats, end the session.
 - If your cat does eat the treats, but only after you've walked away, end the session and continue with classical conditioning until they do eat in front of you.
- Once your cat is eating in front of you, push to Capturing Social Behaviors.

Troubleshooting:

- Is your cat not eating? Make sure you're using high value treats such as baby food, salmon, chicken, etc. (unless they have medical dietary restrictions). If they are still not eating using these novel treats, then keep trying different treats until you find something they like.
- Be sure to listen to what your cat is telling you. If you try pushing and see fear- or any other signs of stress- increase, then drop back to the previous step. Don't push further until you see relaxed and social behavior on each step.

Capturing Social Behaviors

Once your cat begins eating in front of you, you can now work on capturing social behavior. Behaviors like meowing, making soft eye contact, giving slow blinks or stretching their paws out towards you in an affiliative manner all count as social behaviors and can/should be rewarded.

- Approach your cat and wait for them to show any social behavior.
- When the behavior is performed (the cat makes eye contact with you, meows, etc.), click ("mark") and then reward.
- Continue doing this until the cat begins coming towards you and/or starts showing social behaviors immediately upon your approach and throughout the session.
- Once your cat is consistently showing social behavior, move on to Hand Targeting.

Troubleshooting:

- Is your cat not eating? Step back to classical conditioning, or you can bridge the two protocols and reward your cat for performing social behaviors on your approach, walk away and then repeat until they are eating in front of you again.
- **Does** your cat seem to be fearful of the clicker? Try using something with a softer noise, like a pen, or muffle the sound of the clicker by putting it in your pants pocket when clicking. You can also replace the clicker with a verbal marker of “yes” or “good”.
- Keep sessions short, approximately 2 to 5 minutes per session.

Hand Targeting

Teaching the Behavior:

1. Begin by extending your arm all the way out, with one or two fingers extended, so that your body is an arm’s length away from your cat but your finger tips are approximately 3-6 inches from your cat’s nose. Then, simply wait. Mark and reward anytime your cat makes contact with your hand (or even sniffs it or shows any interest in it at first).
2. Repeat, gradually holding your hand out closer and closer to your body so that the cat is coming closer and closer to you. Eventually, you will just have your hand at your side or in your lap, so the cat is coming to *you*.
3. At this point you can try petting your cat if they remain soft and relaxed. Stop at the first sign of stress or avoidance behavior.

Notes:

- Hold your hand with one or two fingers extended.
- Try resting your hand or arm on a sturdy surface such as the edge of the kennel or some bedding, since this exercise involves a lot of waiting.
- Push to the next step when your cat has successfully targeted your hand at the current step’s length four out of five or more, hold on three out of five times, and drop on two out of five times or fewer.

Petting

Now for the best part: petting! The final step in confidence building, **this** is what all of the previous protocols have led us to.

Teaching the Behavior:

1. Hold your hand out and let your cat sniff and inspect it.
2. Wait for your cat to offer social behaviors and solicit attention from you such as head butting or cheek rubbing.
3. Once your cat starts to solicit attention, pet them for approximately 1 to 3 seconds to begin with, and then disengage.
4. Offer treats after you disengage. Wait for them to finish eating before offering your hand again, or, if they did not eat, offer your hand again and wait for them to solicit attention, repeating the process.
5. As your cat becomes more comfortable, you can lengthen the amount of time you spend petting them by a few seconds each time. Be sure your cat remains soft and relaxed and watch for any signs of arousal such as tail flicking, shifting weight away, distress vocalizations, etc. If stress occurs, then immediately stop petting and drop back to step one. If your cat remains over the

threshold, then either drop back to capturing social behaviors, switch to interactive play, or end the session.

Notes:

- Be patient and wait for your cat to make the choice to come to you.
- Keep interactions short to start (1 to 3 seconds), and then lengthen as your cat continues to solicit attention.
- Make sure there is plenty of room for your cat to move away and remove themselves if needed.
- Oftentimes your cat may want to be near you but not necessarily want to be petted or otherwise interact. If your cat approaches you and lays down near you but is not making any physical contact with you, they likely just want to hang out. You can ask them by holding your hand near your cat for them to sniff. If they sniff and then initiate contact by head bunting or cheek rubbing then they would like some attention. If they either sniff your hand and then disengage, or ignore you altogether, then they just want to be near you. Watch for signs of fear/anxiety, as indicated at the end of this guide, to know when to stop interacting with your cat.
- **Always let them choose.** Allowing your cat to interact with you on their **own** terms will help them learn to trust you. In fact, sometimes just acting like you are not paying them any mind at all can go a long way in letting a fearful cat know you mean no harm. Ever notice how the person in the room who *least* likes cats tends to be the person that the cat interacts with the most or gets closest to? It's because they like being ignored and given the choice to interact on their own terms! Fearful cats tend to warm up to their main caretaker, but likely will remain fearful of visitors. It is important that you do not force your cat to interact with any visitors if they are frightened of them, or they may become even more scared. Instead, **have them ignore your cat.** If your cat comes out of hiding, visitors should gently toss treats but not attempt to interact further.

Enrichment for Confidence Building



Providing enrichment and setting up your home to help suit your cat's needs will go a long way in helping them settle in and feel comfortable and confident within their new environment.

Puzzle Toys

Puzzle toys or food-dispensing toys can be a great way for a cat who is food-motivated to build confidence. **Solving puzzles helps cats build confidence by allowing them to practice their natural**

problem solving and hunting skills productively and learn that they have control over their environment. There are lots of interactive/puzzle toys that all vary in their degrees of difficulty. Start with something easy, like a ball with a hole(s) for treats to fall out of, or a shallow box with a handful of treats in it with shredded/wadded paper, and let the cat figure out how to get the treats out (an empty tissue box works great for this!). As they get better and faster at these puzzles, you can buy or make new toys that are harder (smaller holes, more complex moving parts, etc.–you can search for “cat enrichment” online and see lots of DIY ideas as well as products you can buy!). Cats are very good at grabbing and pulling things out of holes!

Cat Grass

Providing more of a nutritional boost than mental, cat grass is still a fun thing for your cat to have, chew on and play with. Not to be confused with catnip, cat grass is its own separate entity and very easy to grow yourself either outside or indoors.

Catnip

Catnip is likely the most popular enrichment given to cats. It’s cheap, easy to obtain and makes for a ton of really funny videos and moments. Cats can enjoy catnip in a couple different ways. You may see them sniff and roll around in it, where they typically then get a burst of energy and get the cat zoomies, or you may see them eat it which often has a calming/sedative effect. What your cat does with it just depends on their mood. If you offer catnip and your cat doesn’t do anything with it, don’t worry, it may be because they genetically do not respond to catnip. Approximately 75% of cats have the receptors needed to get the benefits from catnips, so your cat may be part of the group that doesn’t understand what the fuss is all about.

Visual Enrichment

Visual enrichment is especially recommended if your cat was ever an outdoor cat who now lives inside, though anyone can enjoy this just the same. Cats, at their core, are hunters, and they love to watch birds, squirrels and other critters go on about their day. If you have a window in your home that has good wildlife traffic, then give your cat access to it whenever they please, so they can perch and enjoy the show. If you don’t have windows in your home for your cat to access, then you can pull up videos on YouTube on either your phone or TV for them to watch. Just search “bird videos for cats,” and you’ll get an array of results.

Vertical Space

Cats love to climb, and they’ll often hide up high if/when they feel like they need or want to remove themselves. Having a number of vertical space options is crucial for many cats’ happiness and can be obtained by having cat trees available, shelves for your cat to jump and rest on, access to taller furniture, etc. You may find that your cat prefers to eat their meals up in one of these higher spaces as well.

Hidey Spots

In addition to vertical space, cats like to have space at ground level to hide and hunker down in. Ground level hidey spots offer cats a quick access place to retreat to if/when they feel uncomfortable and need to remove themselves from a situation, as well as acting as a temporary cover during play to “hide” from their “prey”. Hidey spots can be anything from a cardboard box, to a chair with a blanket draped over it, or anything that provides a form of covered shelter.

Scratching

Just like dogs like to chew, cats love to scratch. Having appropriate scratching options will go a long way in helping to keep them from tearing up furniture, your arms or anything else you may not want them to scratch. Another area where you should expect a lot of trial and error, many cats can and will be particular about the type of surfaces they like to scratch. Some will prefer cardboard, others carpet-like material,

others roll-type material, etc. In addition, you may notice that your cat likes to scratch either horizontally, or vertically, meaning you may have to adjust how their scratcher is positioned.



Feliway

Feliway is a product that mimics the scent released by cats when they are calm and secure, like when mothers are nursing their kittens. This smell is associated with happiness and comfort for cats and tends to promote calm behavior, so it can help reduce stress and anxiety. Feliway brand makes diffusers that you can plug into your outlets (one diffuser covers up to 700 sq ft) or spray that you can put onto blankets/beds. Feliway paired with other methods of behavior modification has been shown to reduce fear in cats.

Interactive Play

Allowing cats to practice hunting behavior with wand toys is another great way to help cats gain confidence in themselves as the predators that they are! Playing is an important part of **every** cat's day as it allows your cat to engage in hunting and stalking behaviors that are very natural for them. Move the toys **away** from the cat and make them move like prey (sudden, erratic movements between slow movements, lots of pauses) End play sessions with mealtimes or treats to help mimic their natural hunting sequence (observe → stalk → chase → catch → eat).. Play acts as a confidence builder because they'll gain morale each time they catch the toy, and it also acts a yardstick for your cat's emotional wellbeing, as the better they feel, the more they will engage in species-specific behaviors.



Notes:

- Be sure to use appropriate toys such as lure toys, wands, or anything that keeps the toy away from your hand.
- Never encourage your cat to play with or use your hand as a toy.
- Set a timer for 10 minutes to ensure that the cat is getting a good amount of play time.
- Have some treats ready to give at the end of the session.
- Stop the first time your cat moves away or shows any signs of anxiety or arousal.
- Never use laser pointers as toys. Many cats will chase the laser pointers, but without there being a tangible object for the cat to catch, it can actually create frustration and over-arousal. Imagine trying to hold on to smoke without understanding that just because you can see it doesn't mean there's something to touch.

Teaching the Behavior:

1. Find a lure or wand toy that your cat likes. Some prefer feather toys while others like something that resembles small prey-like animals.
2. Set a timer for 10 minutes. This gives the cat a good amount of time to engage in the game and get a good session without building stamina which could have an adverse effect in the long run.
3. Move the toy along the ground, flick it up in the air, and move it erratically. You may notice some cats have preference if the toy moves a particular way.

4. Do your best to keep the toy moving away from the cat. Think about how a prey animal such as a bird or a mouse would act if there was a cat around. They would never move directly towards the cat (unless the cat was hiding) or climb on top of the cat, or boop them on the nose, etc. We want to try and make the game as realistic as possible so the cat will engage.
5. Wait for your cat to come out and chase after the toy. Be patient; many cats will take a few moments to minutes to stay back and watch the toy first. This is okay; watching and observing is part of the game!
6. When the cat does come to catch the toy, keep it moving, and try to find a good balance between allowing them to catch it and continuing to move it away from them. It's okay if the toy "gets away" as not every hunt is successful, but we want to still allow the cat to have success to keep them engaged.
7. Once the 10-minute timer is up, end the session by allowing the cat to catch the toy, and then drop treats next to the toy. Once the cat starts eating, remove the toy and end the session. This completes the hunt sequence, offers a conclusive end to the session and helps prevent the cat from being frustrated.

CAT LANGUAGE



INTERESTED



FRIENDLY



ATTENTIVE



RELAXED



TRUSTING



FRIENDLY, RELAXED



CONTENT



CONFLICTED, CAUTIOUS



PLAYFUL



EXCITED



"THIS IS MINE"



ANXIOUS



PREDATORY



WORRIED



FRIGHTENED



THREATENED



TERRIFIED



SUPER TERRIFIED



IRRITATED



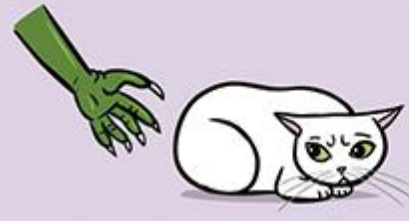
DISGUSTED



Body Language of Feline Anxiety



Slight crouching



Major crouching

More Subtle Signs of Fear & Anxiety



Dilated Eyes



Ears Turned Back,
Furrowed Brow



Staring,
Focused on Object



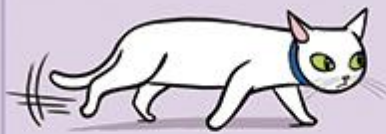
Hiding,
Looks Half Asleep



Laying on Side,
Tail Flicking



Hair Raised, Staring,
Ears Turned Back



Walking with Flat Back,
Tail Down, Head Down



Ready to Jump Off Perch



Suddenly Grooming,
Excessive Grooming

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