



“Decompress For Success!”

What Does “Decompression” Mean?

Allowing new pets in your home time to decompress will make or break a relationship. Not allowing animals proper time (and set up) to decompress is the most common cause for pets being returned to the shelter.

When people adopt a new pet, the first inclination for most people is to introduce them to everyone in their life and try to get them “settled in” as quickly as possible. But think of it from the animal’s perspective. You’ve been kidnapped and taken to a strange, scary place where your whole routine has been replaced by strange people, sights, sounds, and smells. Nothing is familiar or makes sense yet. You don’t know when your next meal is or if you’re safe or not yet. Then you leave the strange place with strange people (again) and go to **another** unfamiliar place. Before you ended up in the shelter, you had a “home” but it wasn’t like this home. You’re faced with strange people, sights, sounds, and smells again (and for some animals, this all happens within a matter of days!). You don’t know who these people are or what their intentions are. You have no idea what to do or what to expect, which heightens your anxiety. Once again, you have no idea if you’re safe or if you need to defend yourself or find food or shelter. You don’t know what is expected of you. So you try a little of everything. You go to the bathroom in different places. You try to climb up on and scratch different surfaces. You eat the food you are served, then you don’t eat the food you are served. You just try to figure out just what it is that this place wants. Until your cat can trust you and has developed a relationship with you (and know they are safe in their environment), how can they trust anyone else that you introduce them to? If you didn’t know where you were and when your next meal would come, would you be able to relax and make friends? Putting your cat in new situations/environments with people they don’t yet trust fully is setting them up for failure.

In summary, **SLOW DOWN!** Two weeks may seem like a long time, but it’s very short in comparison to the many years (hopefully!) you will have with your new companion if you allow them to decompress first!

Base Camp/Safe Haven

The most important thing about taking any cat into a new home environment is making sure they have an appropriate space set up for them. This should be, ideally, a **smaller room without any large furniture to hide under or behind**. If they are able to get underneath or behind something large or bulky like a washer/drier, bed, or couch, they often become even **more** fearful over time as they feel trapped and helpless. Instead, **block off all these areas** and give them only a small space so that they don’t feel so overwhelmed by all the space in the entire

house, and give them small “hidey holes,” like boxes or covered cat beds. Having vertical space (like a cat tree) is also very important for making cats feel comfortable. Once the cat becomes comfortable in their **smaller** space, only **then** should you open up more of the house for them, and even then it’s best to do one or two rooms (or maybe one floor) at a time—so don’t leave all the doors in the house open for a few days or weeks after they’re out of base camp and ready for that much freedom!

What to Do During Decompression

While cats are adjusting to a new environment/routine, **any stressors should be kept to an absolute minimum**. This means they **should not be meeting new people OR animals that don’t live in the home with them**. This generally takes two to three weeks, but it depends on the cat (more confident cats may take less time, and more fearful ones may take longer—but this is just a generalization and you should monitor your cat)! At this point in time, any added stress (on top of already going through major life changes) may push them over their threshold and cause them to exhibit behavior that **they may not otherwise, when they are at a normal baseline stress level**.

Like dogs (and most animals), cats need **consistency and routine**, especially when undergoing changes. The more they know what to predict (the same basic things happen at the same general times each day), the less anxious they will likely be. Everyone in the home should treat cats the same and have the same expectations as well. This will always be important, but especially during decompression time, as you are establishing their routine for the foreseeable future. Routines also allow you to establish feeding time, which is a **major way to bond with your cat**. Feed them one or two small meals a day, and sit with them each time they eat, at least for a minute, to establish a positive relationship with you. You can begin playing with your cat during this time as well, as cats need playtime every day and it helps build confidence! Just be aware that they may not be confident enough yet to really play much—and that’s okay. Don’t push them to do anything during this time. Allow them to make choices (if it’s safe) and stick to strictly positive interactions. This is the **best way** to establish a harmonious home with your new pet.

Happy Cat Checklist

Food

- Provide **nutritional** food with serving sizes suited to your cat's age and weight.
 - Look for a whole meat like chicken or fish (not “meal” or “by-products”) as the first ingredient.
 - Avoid foods with a lot of fillers like corn, wheat, and other grains.
- If your cat can regulate their own food intake, free feeding/grazing may be the best option. If not (many cats will overeat with free feeding), provide your cat multiple small meals a day.
- Provide multiple food bowls in multiple **different** locations for a multi-cat household.
- Food bowls/feeders should be in a separate room, or separate area of the same room if space is an issue, as water bowls/fountains or litter boxes.
- Feed your cat with interactive/puzzle feeders instead of bowls (*if your cat enjoys them*)!

Water

- Use either a bowl or a fountain, whichever your cat prefers.
 - Ceramic and stainless steel are easier to clean than plastic, but experiment with which texture your cat prefers (if any).
- Water bowls should be low and broad enough that your cat doesn't bump their whiskers (which can be very uncomfortable and/or startling to some cats!).
- Water bowls shouldn't be near food bowls or litter boxes.
- Provide **multiple** water bowls/fountains in multiple **different** locations throughout the house.
- Provide **fresh** water **every day**.

Litter Boxes

- Keep litter boxes clean (scoop **every day** and deep clean once a month)!
- **No self-cleaning litter boxes!**
- Use the litter substrate that your cat prefers (*typically*, the finer and more sand-like the better).
- *Most* cats find litter box liners aversive.
- Don't use strong scented litter or cleaners on (or near) litter boxes to deep clean them (just soap and hot water is best).
- Provide multiple litter boxes—even with only one cat—distributed in multiple **different** locations across home.
 - General recommendation is one **more** than the amount of cats
- Provide a litter box that is big enough and deep (or shallow for older/injured/disabled cats) enough for your specific cat.
 - Most cats prefer 1-2 inches of litter substrate, but some cats may prefer **more** or **less**.

- If your cat has very low mobility and/or can't step up at all, consider potty pads (or anything else that is flush with the ground) with some litter sprinkled on top of them.
- *Most* cats prefer a litter box without a flap or even a cover.
- Place litter boxes in quiet, low traffic, but **open and easily accessible**, locations (not in corners or end of hallways or in areas with loud appliances like laundry rooms or kitchens)

Scratching

- Provide scratching boards, posts, or trees that are tall/long enough for your cat to **fully stretch out their whole body/legs**.
- Provide scratching boards/posts/trees that are **sturdy** and **stable** (most cats won't use them if they wobble or fall over at all).
- Provide multiple **different scratching surface options** (the most common materials for scratching are *sisal*, *carpet*, and *corrugated cardboard*).
- Provide both **horizontal** and **vertical** scratching options.

Play

- Provide at least one **interactive** play session daily (two or more for more active cats).
- Play should be interactive and challenge your cat to use their **natural hunting skills**.
- Self-play toys should be switched out regularly to retain interest.
- Provide appropriate enrichment to encourage species-specific behavior ("cat TV," window access, food puzzles, enclosed patios, etc).

Mental and Physical Health

- Your cat should go to the vet for a yearly checkup and recommended vaccines (and is kept on heartworm and flea prevention).
 - Spend time introducing your cat to nail trims/medical procedures and handling **gradually** and **with treats** to make a positive association.
- Your cat should have **agency** (opportunities to make choices) in their daily life (always in interacting with other people/pets, but also with things like food/play choices).
- Your cat's daily life, **and the way in which everyone interacts with them**, should be as **routine** and **predictable** as possible.
- Your cat should have safe spaces to hide (like covered beds/boxes), and access to **elevated** spaces (perches, shelves, trees, etc).

Healthy Relationships

- Provide **separate** resources (food, water, litter boxes, sleeping areas/beds) for **each cat** in your household.
- Be aware of your cat's body language and respect their boundaries (don't touch/interact with them if they don't want you to, and stop petting when they tell you they're done).
 - Don't pick your cat up if they don't want to be picked up.

- Never **punish** your cat (yelling, hitting/“spanking,” spraying with water, etc).
 - This usually does not stop unwanted behavior and will most likely make your cat behave aggressively towards you, or even people in general, in the future.