

Working with Scaredy-Cats

“Scaredy-Cats” are cats who need extra time and patience as they adjust to your home. In this handout, we’ll walk you through the best ways to work with these cats and help them feel safe. The most important part of the process is to go at the cat’s pace. Each cat is different and has had different life experiences prior to adoption. Some may only take a few days to feel at home, while others may take weeks or months. Be patient, and don’t give up hope!

Getting Ready for a Scaredy-Cat

Every cat, no matter their personality, should start off in a small “welcome room” where they can stay for several weeks or even months, depending on how long it takes them to adjust. Ideally, this should be somewhere that you can easily and comfortably spend time in, such as an office, extra bedroom, or even a spacious bathroom (this is less ideal, but will work in a pinch). Cats can become overwhelmed when they are introduced to too much space at once.

When setting up the welcome room, make sure to block off anywhere that your cat could hide that you can’t access, such as under beds or couches. This will make it easier to work with them without causing them (and you!) unnecessary stress. You should instead provide your new cat with safe hiding spots where they feel secure, but are accessible to you if needed. Examples of these are cardboard boxes, cat cubbies (with removable tops), tent beds, and cat carriers (top loading) without the front door.

Make sure the room is set up with everything your cat will need before they actually come home. Put their food and water bowls out, set up their litterbox and hiding places, and add enrichment items like scratching posts and toys. Make sure resources like food, water, and litterboxes are not too far from hiding spots so that your cat doesn’t have to venture too far. You can also provide items with your scent on them to help your kitty get used to you even when you aren’t there.

Depending on your cat’s individual needs, make sure to buy some high value rewards/treats, such as Delectables squeeze ups or plain chicken/fish filets. These treats should be saved to reward progress and solidify positive associations. For example, you could give a treat to your cat the first time they come out of the carrier after coming home, or the first time they approach on you on their own. Not all cats are food motivated, however, so you may need to try other rewards such as catnip or special toys.

The First Day

Start by bringing your cat into their welcome room or space. Keep things quiet and calm, and avoid other pets or anything that could cause lots of excitement. Open up the carrier and take a few steps back. Sit on the floor a few feet away from the carrier and allow your cat time to look around and get a feel for their surroundings. For cats who are highly undersocialized, you may want to leave the room for a bit to allow them to come out when no one is around.



In the Welcome Room

You'll need to find a balance between spending enough time with your new cat that they are able to get used to you, while also ensuring they have enough alone time to settle in. This is especially important if they too nervous to eat, drink, or use the litterbox while you are in the room with them. Start by spending only a few minutes in the room with your kitty, and slowly increase the amount of time as you see them respond positively to your presence.



To help bond with your cat and establish positive associations, you can do a couple of things:

1. Create a routine of bringing your cat's food in each day at the same day. Call their name softly when you come in to help alert them to your presence. Over time, your cat will learn this routine and begin to expect you at certain times each day.
2. Place a couple treats outside of your cat's hiding spot before you leave the room. Don't leave treats actually inside the hiding spots, as this will encourage them to stay there. This will provide a reward for your cat when they venture out of their hiding spot.

While you're spending time with your new cat, start by just sitting in the room and not actively paying attention to them. This will allow them to get used to your presence. Eventually, you can work towards eye contact and giving "slow blinks" as a sign of trust. If your cat returns these "slow blinks", that's an excellent sign. Talking softly to your cat can also help them feel more comfortable.

During the initial period when your cat is still hiding, you do not want to reach for them in their hiding spot, as they might feel cornered and lash out. Any hissing, growling, or swatting is a sign that your cat is scared and needs more space. Wait for them to start coming out on their own, and use a high value reward when they do. If your cat is playful, you can try using wand toys to encourage them. This will help build positive associations between you and your kitty.

Once your kitty has begun trusting you and is both coming out often and approaching you, you can start attempting some slow and gentle pets. Many fearful cats are "head-shy" and the approach is often very scary. Be sure to let the cat approach you first, and make sure that your movements are very slow and steady.

Next Steps

Over time, as your cat becomes more confident and has been exploring the welcome room without hiding, you can begin slowly offering them more space. Depending on the size of your home, you may want to open things up gradually by using screen doors or baby gates to limit access to certain floors or rooms. Keep in mind that the best time to bond and build a routine with your cat is while they are in their welcome room. Once you give them more space, you may initially see their behavior regress to some degree. There will be new distractions and opportunities for your cat to hide. Take advantage of the time your cat is in their welcome room to build a strong bond with your cat, which will be crucial to a positive long term relationship.