



TONY LA RUSSA'S ANIMAL RESCUE FOUNDATION

THE FEARFUL CAT

When cats feel threatened, they usually respond in three ways to the object, person or situation they perceive as a threat: fight, flee or freeze.

Whiskers may show the following behaviors when he is fearful:

- Hiding
- Aggression such as spitting, hissing, growling, swatting, biting, or scratching
- Loss of control over bladder and/or bowels
- Freezing in place



It's normal to want to help and comfort Whiskers when he's frightened. However, this isn't necessarily the best thing to do from his point of view. It's normal for Whiskers to feel insecure or frightened in a new environment. Often, a new cat will hide for a day or two when first brought home. Sometimes a traumatic experience such as a visit to the veterinarian, or introducing a new animal into the household, can disrupt Whiskers' routine and send him under the bed for a few days.

What Causes Fearful Behavior?

Closely observe Whiskers to determine the trigger for his fearful behavior. Keep in mind that just because a person or animal approaching Whiskers has good intentions, doesn't mean that he feels safe. The trigger for his fearful behavior could be anything. Some common triggers are:

- a particular person
- a stranger
- another animal
- a child
- loud noises

What to Do

Take the following steps to reduce Whiskers' anxiety and help him become more confident:

- Schedule an appointment with a veterinarian for a thorough physical examination to rule out any medical reasons for Whiskers' fearful behavior. Cats don't always act sick, even when they are. Any sudden behavior change could mean Whiskers is ill

and should be taken seriously. Some common symptoms that Whiskers may be ill are aggressiveness, hiding and eliminating outside of the litter box.

- If Whiskers is healthy, but hiding, leave him alone. He'll come out when he's ready. To force Whiskers out of hiding will only make him more fearful. Make sure he has easy access to food, water and a litter box. Clean the litter box and change the food and water every day to keep track of whether or not Whiskers is eating and drinking.
- Keep any contact with the fear stimulus to a minimum.
- Keep Whiskers' routine as regular as possible. Cats feel more confident if they know when to expect daily feeding, playing, cuddling and grooming.
- Try to desensitize Whiskers to his fear stimulus:
 - Determine what distance Whiskers can be from the fear stimulus without responding fearfully
 - Introduce the fear stimulus at this distance while feeding him tasty treats and praising him
 - Slowly move the fear stimulus closer while continuing to praise Whiskers and offering treats
 - If at any time during this process Whiskers shows fearful behavior, start over from the beginning. This is the most common mistake made when desensitizing an animal and it can be avoided by working in short sessions, paying careful attention to Whiskers in order not to progress too rapidly
 - Obtain help from a professional animal behavior specialist with the desensitization process

A Note about Aggression

If Whiskers is threatening another person or animal, seek help from a professional animal behavior specialist. To keep everyone safe in the meantime, confine Whiskers to an area of the house where all interactions with him are kept to a minimum and supervised by a responsible person. Cat bites and scratches are serious and can easily become infected. Bites should be reported to the local animal control agency so Whiskers can be quarantined and watched for signs of rabies.

What Not to Do

Don't punish Whiskers for his fearful behavior. Whiskers will associate punishment with what he's doing at the time he's punished. This will only cause him to become fearful and he still won't understand why he's being punished.

Don't force Whiskers to experience the object or situation that is causing him fear. For example, if Whiskers is afraid of a certain person, don't let that person try to pick him up. This will only make Whiskers more frightened of that person.