napa humane
where compassion lives

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Fearful Cats

You can understand and care for your scared, stressed, hiding or aggressive cat

Every cat is different, so each is frightened by different things. Every cat has his own way of responding to fear, too.

A naturally timid cat may be afraid of many things and spend a lot of her life in hiding, while a naturally confident cat will be less fearful and will usually recover more quickly from scary events.

For example, one cat may confront a strange dog by hissing, spitting, and puffing out his fur to make himself look big. Or he may decide to cut his losses and beat a hasty retreat. Some cats are so overwhelmed with fear that they simply freeze, too terrified to run. A really laid-back cat, on the other hand, may not see the dog as a threat; he may simply sniff the dog and walk away.

How do you know if your cat is afraid?

Your cat might show the following behaviors when she's afraid:

- Running away
- Hiding
- Aggression (which includes spitting, hissing, growling, swatting, biting, scratching, puffing fur and tail, arching back, swishing tail and flattening ears)
- Freezing in place
- Losing control of bladder/bowels
- Releasing anal glands
- Refusing to use the litter box

What are common fear triggers?

You'll need to observe your cat carefully to determine the reasons for his fearful behavior. Here are some common triggers:

- A loud noise or a quick movement
- A strange environment
- A strange person or animal
- An active child
- A stressful event, such as a move or a trip to the vet

What fearful behavior is normal?

Some fearful behaviors are acceptable and normal. For example, most cats will feel insecure or frightened in a new environment. Often, your cat will hide for a day or two when introduced to a new home.

Sometimes a traumatic experience—such as taking him to the veterinarian or bringing a new animal into the home—can disrupt her routine and send her under the bed for a few days.

But some cats are so fearful that they seem to live in a near-constant state of anxiety, or they may redirect their fear into aggression toward people or other pets.

How can you help your scared cat?

Here are some basics:

- If your cat is hiding but healthy, leave him alone. He'll come out when he's ready. Forcing him out of his hiding spot 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 so you know whether he's eating and drinking.
- Food is a great motivator for cats, so if yours is afraid of someone in the house, give that person feeding duty.

What should you do if your cat becomes aggressive?

- If your cat seriously threatens you, another person, or another pet—and the behavior isn't an isolated incident—you should seek help as soon as possible from a cat behavior specialist.
- To keep everyone safe in the meantime, confine your cat to an area of the house where you can keep all interactions with her to a minimum and have a responsible person supervise her.
- Treat all cat bites and scratches seriously; remember that they can easily become infected.

About Napa Humane

The Humane Society of Napa County and SPCA, known as Napa Humane, is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1973. Recognizing that companion animals are an important part of healthy communities, we've grown to consider Napa Humane a community service organization. Our programs and services are designed to address the needs of animals – and also to provide support, education, and assistance for all the people who care for and about them.

Napa Humane is a private and independent organization that is supported by private donations by individuals and businesses, bequests, and fees for service. We receive no government funding, tax dollars or funding from national animal welfare organizations.

Our Mission

To promote the welfare of companion animals through protection, advocacy, education, and by example.