

All About Pets

The national pet care information service



NERVOUS CATS



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

When you take on a cat or kitten it may be quiet and wary for the first few days (or even the first few weeks) until it gets used to you and its new environment.

However, some cats remain very fearful despite a gentle welcome and time to settle in. This can cause their owners great anxiety because they feel the cat is not happy. The cat may run and hide as soon as someone comes to the house or if there is a sudden noise, or from common everyday sounds such as the television. Many such cats spend a great deal of their time under the bed or on top of the wardrobe, hiding from the world.



A nervous or frightened cat can make a very disappointing pet, especially if the household that has adopted it is a busy and noisy one. They will probably see little of the cat until the children have gone to bed and the adults have settled down quietly in front of the TV in the evening.



There can be several causes of nervousness in cats

- Genetics: Like people, some cats seem to be naturally more fearful than others.
- Bad experiences: The cat may have previously had a frightening experience. Its natural survival mechanisms make it generally fearful in anticipation of it happening again.
- Lack of experience at a crucial time in its development

Kittens which meet people and other animals and which are exposed to the general hubbub of life by the time they are eight weeks old will take almost anything in their stride and deal with it as a normal part of life. This is the making of a confident cat. Eight weeks seems to be a very crucial cut-off point for the kitten. If it has not had these very early experiences it will find life with humans very difficult to cope with. Take for example the feral kitten (one born to a cat living wild) which does not have contact with people in these early weeks. It will behave like a wild animal and handling or confinement will cause acute fear. Although some people persevere with older feral kittens, it requires a great deal of time and patience to get them to respond and this lack of early experience is usually very difficult, if not sometimes impossible, to get over.

Hence, knowing a cat's background can make a difference in determining whether you can help it or not. However, for many owners this is an unknown factor as they have no idea what happened to their cat before they took it on. They have to try to tackle the problem anyway. Nervousness is not something that can be solved overnight. It takes patience and time.

Consider the cat which hides under the bed at the slightest noise or activity within the house. It has removed itself from what it sees as a life-threatening situation and feels a flood of relief. This feeling is very strong and reinforces the fleeing behaviour – after all, the cat has saved its own life. As a solitary species the cat has no pack to back it up if things go wrong – if threatened its best chance of survival is to run away and hide, staying very quiet until the danger has passed. Owners must be able to offer something even more rewarding than this feeling of safety and relief that the cat experiences on following its instincts if they want to stop it running. This can be very difficult.

The cat needs to learn that there is nothing threatening in the situation it is running from. It can be very useful to obtain an indoor crate or kittening pen for the cat's re-education. Place it in the corner of the room and cover with a blanket so that the cat can see out of the front but the sides are covered and the cat feels somewhat protected. Put the cat in the pen first of all during a quiet period so that it can get used to it and relax. It will probably like the feeling of protection the pen provides. Feed favourite treats in the pen and provide a litter tray. Let the cat view all the normal household goings-on from its safe haven and gradually add more 'action' to its repertoire.



When the cat seems relaxed ask a friend to visit. Normally the cat would run away when the doorbell rings, but now it has to watch and listen, albeit from the safety of its pen. You want the cat to realise that the threats it perceived are not going to materialise. Ask your guest to feed the cat through the cage with a special titbit and offer lots of praise and soothing talk. You can then graduate to having the cat in the room without the pen and inviting visitors in (again pre-briefed so they know to behave quietly and prevent startling the cat). When the cat learns that everything is not a threat and that the rewards of staying around are indeed worth overcoming its fear for, you are making progress.

Never lose your temper or try to force things too quickly – this will just reinforce the cat's previous fears. If the cat progresses, even slowly, you are likely to be dealing with an animal that is overcoming a fear rather than one which has missed out during its socialisation period as a kitten. Build on your successes gradually. Remember that cats feel safe in high places so when you progress to letting the cat out in the room with you, provide it with a high perch where it can sit in safety and watch the world go by beneath. Use warmth, affection and food as rewards for being with you.





Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

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