

Behaviour Modification for Fearful Cats

Step 1: Meeting Minimum Welfare Criteria



Before beginning a behaviour modification plan, make sure the cat is eating, drinking, and using the litter box, at least when people are not around. This is to ensure we do not inappropriately add stress to the cat. Once the cat is meeting these criteria, begin behaviour modification using the following steps.



Step 2: Eating with Person in Room

Offer the cat high-value food in a bowl while a person sits quietly in the same room approximately 3 feet away.

Step 3: Eating From Hands



First, offer the cat food using an extension of a hand such as a long spoon or touch stick. As the cat becomes comfortable eating from the hand extender, gradually move the hand up the handle toward the cat, until they are eating from the person's hand.

Step 4: Allowing Light Touch

Slowly and gently reach an empty hand toward the cat followed by offering food from the other hand. If using the hand feels unsafe, switch to a touch stick.

Retract food hand and petting hand at the same time so the cat does not get treats while the hand is removed. As the cat becomes more comfortable, incorporate gentle movements of the first hand or touch stick, then start incorporating light touch (barely grazing the top of the fur) behind the ears or on the back of the neck.



Step 5: Increasing Petting and Scratching

Increase both the duration and intensity of petting if the cat shows signs of tolerating this well. Continue petting for short periods after treats are finished to test if the cat has learned to enjoy petting.



Step 6: Seeking Attention Without Food

Observe if the cat will seek human attention without treats. When interacting, positive signs may include a cat leaning into pets, purring, and/or kneading with its feet. When petting stops, they may move toward the hand, lick or paw at the hands to solicit pets. When the cat is voluntarily approaching most people seeking physical contact, they are ready to graduate from the behaviour modification plan!



Behaviour Modification Tips and Tricks

- Go slow and steady - patience is key!
- Use a quiet voice, slow movements, and avoid looking a fearful cat directly in the eyes.
- To begin, keep each session brief (approximately 2-3 minutes).
- Try a wide variety of high-value treats to determine a cat's preference (e.g. wet food or treats, canned fish, squeeze-up treats, dry or moist food or treats)
- Watch body language carefully to ensure the cat is comfortable. **Do not force interaction.** If the cat is highly fearful or showing aggression, go back to an earlier step without contact, or stop the session.
- Anxiety-reducing medication may be beneficial in a cat's behaviour modification program progression. Discuss options with your veterinarian.

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