

HELPING YOUR SCAREDY CAT ADJUST

You bring your newly adopted cat into your home, looking forward to years of happiness, purrs and snuggles. But as soon as you open the carrier door, she bolts for the smallest, darkest corner she can find. What's a cat caretaker to do in a situation like this? You know this cat is stressed and scared — her behavior is clear — and you want your scaredy cat to be able to relax. But how do you help her?

Here are nine tips, based on my experience with my own fearful cat, Maddy-Gold, and many subsequent years of feline care, which can help you transform your scaredy cat into a confident kitty.

1. Keep her environment peaceful



Comfort a scaredy cat with a calming environment. Photography ©skyblue16 | Thinkstock.

If you're playing loud music, if your kids are playing their new video game at full blast, if the dog is sniffing around her hideout or if you're yelling from room to room, for example, that's going to be too much for her to take.

2. Spend quiet time in the room where she's hiding

Read a book, catch up on some paperwork or watch that TV series you DVR'd months ago and haven't had time to see yet. While you're doing that, speak to your little scaredy cat in a soft, soothing tone so she gets used to your voice.

3. Lure her out of hiding with food or treats.

Gently toss or roll a treat to your cat and see how your scaredy cat reacts. If she eats the treat, roll another one toward her. Gradually bring her closer by tossing the treats a shorter distance. While you're doing this, speak to her gently and tell her what a good, brave cat she is.

4. Give her slow blinks

You've probably had a cat give you a kitty kiss, a slow blink that shows she trusts and loves you. You can do the same for your cat, too. When she looks at you, slowly close your eyes, keep them closed for a beat, and slowly open them again. You'll know she's starting to relax a little if she returns the gesture.

5. Build her confidence with play

Once your cat has gotten confident enough to come out of hiding, even if she's just slinking around the edges of the room, start engaging in some gentle, interactive play. Place the feather end of a teaser toy on the ground and then jerk it around in tiny little motions to get her attention. If she looks at the toy and starts acting interested, play with her a bit more, then praise her bravery and give her a treat.

6. Give your scaredy cat plenty of vertical space

A scaredy cat is more likely to explore when she has a high, safe place to observe the goings on in her environment. Tall cat trees and even mats on top of bookshelves can give your cat a new attitude about her world.

7. Give her escape routes

Make sure there are no dead ends in your home. Declutter and give her lots of shelves and other methods of moving all around her environment. You may have to use your feather toy and treats to coax her up onto those shelves.

8. Let your scaredy cat come to you

Don't try to force the issue. Let your cat approach you to sniff your hand rather than putting your hand out to her. As long as you give her time to explore you and her new home at a pace that feels safe to her, she will come out of her shell.

Even when your cat starts to feel comfortable around you, she still may not do as well around strangers and unfamiliar stimuli. It takes time to overcome fear, but with patience and love you can help your cat learn to enjoy her life.