

## **Behavior FAQ: Fraidy Cats—Fear of People, Places and Things**

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Most cats are afraid of anything new. Some quickly overcome their fears and are curious about new things and try to make friends with people. Other cats, who likely aren't well socialized or who perhaps have genetic tendencies toward fearful behavior, have great difficulty adjusting to anything new, including people. They may hide under the bed when guests arrive or avoid new things.

Fears are not rational. Think of something you are extremely afraid of—perhaps it's heights, snakes, flying or insects. It isn't very helpful for someone to force you into an airplane, put a snake around your neck or a bug in your hand and say, "See—it won't hurt you!"

In fact, you are likely to become even more fearful by having these experiences forced on you. The same holds true for your cat, so avoid forcing your cat to experience what he is afraid of. Do not try to pick up a fearful cat and introduce him to visitors. Your cat may become defensive and bite or scratch.

Cats can sometimes habituate (get used to) to the people and things that frighten them. This most often happens with mild fears, where your cat can still tolerate some limited contact with what frightens her.

With more severe fears, your cat will continue to avoid, and never have the chance to get used to, the thing he is afraid of. Instead, you'll need to use carefully implemented behavior modification techniques such as counter conditioning and desensitization procedures. Most cats can learn to be friendlier, but some may never be social butterflies and at ease with everyone.

### **FIND A BEHAVIOR CONSULTANT TO HELP**

Many problems are easily corrected through modification training, particularly if problems are addressed early. Find an animal behavior consultant in your area through one of the following Web sites: [American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](http://www.acvb.org), [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](http://www.iaabc.org) or [Animal Behavior Society](http://www.abn.org). Learn more by reading "Guidelines for Choosing a Trainer or Behavior Consultant."