

Fear of Sudden Movement

By Karen Sueda, DVM

Why is my cat fearful of sudden movement?

Cats may be fearful of sudden movement for several reasons. Many cats have a timid personality. They startle easily, even with apparently mild triggers. Also, sudden movement – such as uncrossing your legs, standing up, or reaching toward them – may be interpreted as a sign that you are about to interact with them. For fearful cats, interacting with a human is not always a pleasurable experience. Finally, shy cats can be intimidated by a person staring directly at them, facing them head on, or standing over them.



How can I make my cat more comfortable with sudden movement?

One way is to use the behavior modification techniques called desensitization and counter-conditioning. (Please refer to the resource called “Using Behavior Modification to Help Your Cat” for general information about these training techniques.)

Prior to starting the behavior modification techniques, it may help to make your movements as slow and deliberate as possible. Ask other family members and visitors to do the same. The type of movement that your cat fears may be difficult to avoid, but try to be as conscientious as possible. Avoid looking at your cat when you engage in these movements or have someone else distract your cat with a treat or other positive interaction. It may be necessary to restrict your cat’s access to areas of the house where sudden movements are likely to occur (e.g., the living room when friends come over to watch the game, the kitchen when you are cooking, busy hallways).

How do I use behavior modification to make my cat less fearful?

You will get your cat used to sudden movement by starting with a level of movement where your cat feels “safe” and then gradually increasing the speed or size of the gesture until your cat is no longer afraid when you move quickly. To do the exercises, you’ll need treats, toys or other rewards for your cat. You may also need the help of a friend who could be the person making the movement while you reward the cat for calm behavior. Or, you can offer your cat a plate of canned cat food or other treats to eat while you perform the movements yourself.

Let’s use the movement of reaching toward your cat as an example. Here are the steps to follow:

- 1. Find a starting speed and size of the gesture.** The exercises begin at the level at which your cat does not exhibit any sign of anxiety, arousal or aggression. Think about whether your cat is more or less scared if you are standing vs. sitting, looking at him vs. looking away, reaching toward him quickly vs. slowly, and making a large gesture

vs. a small gesture. If your cat is least fearful when you slowly outstretch your hand a few inches toward him while you are seated and looking away, this is the level at which the exercises should start. Your cat should appear completely calm while you make the gesture.

2. Start behavior modification. While your cat is distracted (e.g., eating, playing with a toy), make this “low-intensity gesture” (seated, slow and small movement toward him while looking away). Watch your cat’s behavior and body language very closely from the corner of your eye. As long as he remains calm and non-anxious, reward this behavior with treats (e.g., a plate of canned food) or play. Continue this exercise for a few minutes, then end the session with a reward.

3. Increase the intensity. After several sessions, you will notice your cat becoming more accustomed to the innocuous movements you are making. You can then increase the intensity of one (but only one) of the variables involved in the movement. For example, keep the movement slow, but increase the size of the gesture (e.g., reach closer to your cat) while remaining seated and avoiding eye contact. Again, you must monitor the cat closely for any signs of anxiety. If he remains calm, repeat the session a few times. Then, over many sessions, gradually and incrementally reach closer to your cat.

4. If your cat becomes anxious. If you notice your cat displaying signs of anxiety, reduce the intensity of your movement until he is no longer fearful. Then reward the calm behavior to end the session on a positive note. Start the next session at this lower intensity of movement. When you start to increase the intensity, do so in smaller increments than you did before.

5. Adding in other elements. Once your cat is comfortable with you reaching slowly toward him, you can repeat these exercises while altering the other variables. For example, you can start moving faster, gradually picking up speed over many sessions, or you can begin looking at your cat while you reach toward him. You could repeat the exercises while you are standing or decrease the distance to your cat. Remember to only alter one variable at a time before moving on to the next.

Other movements – such as standing from a seated position or walking toward your cat – can be desensitized in a similar manner. Your cat’s ability to generalize and display calm behavior to all sudden movements will depend on how often you can repeat these exercises and add in different elements.

Try to keep in mind that these exercises take time, and progress may be slow. Just remember that, overall, your efforts are helping to improve your cat’s quality of life. In some cases, anti-anxiety medication may help to facilitate behavior modification. If you have questions about desensitization and counter-conditioning exercises or how to apply them to your cat, please consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist.

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See also: [Using Behavior Modification to Help Your Cat](#)