

9 Ways to Build Trust in a Shy Cat

Whether a cat was rescued from a situation where she was treated poorly by humans, has never interacted with humans before, has a health issue that is making her act out from stress, or is simply shy by nature, we have a responsibility as caretakers to help our feline friends learn to trust and feel safe in their environments.

It takes a tremendous amount of patience, sensitivity and care to transition a cat from skittish to secure. The process can be tedious and heartbreaking. All of your hard work can pay off, though.

Give her a quiet space, complete with essentials

Shy cats need to ease into situations slowly, so it's important to make sure she has some space where she can feel safe and protected from all of the sounds, smells, and stimulations of your home. Having a safe space will allow her to explore at her own pace as she builds trust and confidence.

Safe spaces are most commonly created in spare rooms or uncluttered closets. The key is to choose a room or section of your home that gets minimal food traffic and has a few good hiding spaces. The space should include all of her essentials: a comfy bed, a clean litter box, food, fresh water, a scratching post, and toys.

Be patient

Patience is one of the biggest skills to practice if you want to encourage a shy cat to trust you. Getting frustrated or trying to force your cat into a situation she isn't ready for will ultimately do more harm than good and can set back any progress. Most importantly, recognize that every cat is different and don't hold her to the standards or pace of other cats you have known. This cat has her own unique history.

Move slowly and quietly

Shy cats can be easily spooked by loud or sudden movements. When she's around, move in slow and quiet ways. Any sudden movements or loud noises can send her back into hiding.

Speak softly and quietly, but speak often

Like sudden or loud movements, shy cats can be spooked by booming voices. When you talk to her, speak with a voice that is soft and calm. Get her used to your voice by speaking to her often. Hearing your calm voice while you clean her space or simply sit with her will help her become more comfortable with you.

Pay attention to and respect her body language

Give space to a cat that exhibits any of these classic fear/anxiety signs:

- Ears that lay flat against her head
- Fur standing up
- A tail that is either flicking back and forth or laying low and tucked between her legs
- Arched back
- Hissing, spitting or growling

Attempting to touch a cat that is displaying any of these warning signs can not only cause her to distrust you more, but you can become seriously injured if she strikes. A cat who exhibits the following behavior is relaxed and happy:

- Upright or forward ears
- Erect tail
- Exposed belly (unless signs of aggression also are shown)
- Rubbing against you

Let her sniff you

Cats gather a lot of information about their environment through their sense of smell. Before touching your shy cat, put your hand out (palm down and relaxed so it is minimally threatening) and allow her to sniff it. A trusting cat may use this opportunity to rub her face on your hand. Your cat has glands on the sides of her mouth used to mark objects and people she considers to be safe. Take facial rubbing as a great sign.

Respect her “no-touch” zones

Once your cat begins to let you touch her, you may notice that she is uncomfortable being touched on certain areas of her body (many cats don't like being touched on the belly, for instance). As you pet her, pay attention to spots that make her nip at your hand, growl, or jump away. Respect her boundaries and stick to petting the areas that keep her happy and relaxed.

Give her treats

Shy cats can often be coaxed out of hiding by treats. In the beginning, leave the treats where she can access them while you sit nearby. Don't try to touch her while she is displaying any of the above signs of fear or anxiety. This will help her associate treats with safety and security. As she begins to warm up and become more brave, treats will be associated with good experiences.

Engage her in play

Wand toys and laser pointers are great ways to engage her in play while maintaining a distance that will help her feel nonthreatening by you. Touching her head and back with a wand toy also can help you assess her “no-touch” zones.