



# HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY

## Behavior Modification Handout

### Fearful Behaviors in Cats

Cats may perceive different or new situations as threatening. There are many different scenarios which may cause your cat to become afraid. Managing the environment to decrease stress and fear levels in your pet will be a critical part of the behavior modification plan. Cats will often respond to what they feel is a threat in one of two ways: fight or flight. There may be other subtle and fluctuating behaviors but basically when your cat experiences fear he will either run away and hide until the threat has passed or he may feel he has to defend himself against the threat through physical confrontation.

#### Behaviors Associated With Fear and Stress

Reducing your pet's fear and stress with a behavior modification plan will involve determining what your cat is afraid of and how it is affecting his behavior. Some common issues in your household that may be contributing to fearful behavior may be:

- A new pet introduced into the household.
- A new family member such as a baby or a relative that comes into the home.
- Inconsistent household routines or constant interruption in routines.
- A new environment (if you have recently moved to a new house).
- Traumatic experience such as a re-homed pet or a newly adopted pet.
- The lack of appropriate socialization and genetic tendencies (off spring from a parent feline that is not friendly or socialized).
- Possible medical problems with your pet such as conditions causing pain or geriatric problems i.e.: not seeing or hearing as well anymore.
- Classically conditioned fears or events that have in the past predicted a fearful response for your cat.

All of these and many other unknown situations or stimulus may elicit fear or stress in your pet. Some common fearful behaviors your pet may experience as a result may be:

- Hiding under furniture or in other dark secluded areas.
- Avoidance behaviors (running away).
- Defensive aggression (swatting, hissing).
- Fearful body postures (curling up into a ball and making themselves small, ears flattened, head and body held low).
- Not eating or interacting with family members.
- Litterbox problems.
- Vocalization.
- Uncontrolled urination or defecation.
- Drooling and or panting.

#### Reducing Anxiety and Building Confidence

The goal with the behavior modification plan will be to change the way your cat feels about the things he is most afraid. Your goal is to have your cat experience a pleasant outcome (food treat, verbal praise, playing with a favorite toy or anything he may see as a reward) whenever he

encounters the frightening stimulus. It will be very important to proceed with these exercises at a gradual pace and allow plenty of time for your cat to become adjusted to this new experience before proceeding. Never force your cat into an interaction with a frightening stimulus and always start from his point or level of tolerance. If you see a stress or fearful response from your pet then you have gone too far ahead in the training and will need to go back and repeat certain exercises until your pet is more comfortable. For purposes of instruction, we will outline one exercise for your cat that will help him to feel more comfortable with a family member in which he is afraid. The type of training you will be using is desensitizing and the same process will work with a variety of fear-inducing stimulus. You may, however need to seek professional help from a behaviorist if your pet's fearful response is severe or if after a period of training your pet's condition has not improved.

- Determine the threshold of tolerance your pet has for the family member he is afraid of (what amount of movement or spatial distance is required to cause a fear response).
  - Can this person come into the same room?
  - Can this person approach the cat?
  - Will the cat allow petting or any physical contact from this person?
- Always have the exposure start within the cat's acceptable range
- Whenever the person enters a room where the cat is you (as a second party) should offer food treats and soothing verbal praise. The person the cat is fearful of should remain neutral, ignore the cat and stay at a distance. This will illicit a positive connection between the action of the person entering the room and the reward received.
- This step should be repeated until the cat is comfortable with the person coming in and moving around the room.
- Playing with a favorite toy can also be used in unison with food treats to create a positive reinforcement.
- Gradually the person causing the fear response will become involved in delivering food treats and interacting with the favorite toy. Keeping an acceptable distance from the cat and allowing the cat to approach on his own as he becomes more comfortable is an important part of this exercise.
- Gradually decreasing the distance between the person and the cat and continuing the positive reinforcement will help your pet be less fearful. Always practice these exercises in a controlled environment where you will be able to ensure the stress levels for your cat will be minimal.
- Having the person look at and actually acknowledge the cat should be left as the last step as both interactions are more likely to cause an increase in fear response and should not be attempted until the cat has become completely comfortable.

### **Avoiding the Pitfalls**

You should never punish your cat for having a fearful response. Using punishment will only cause your pet to be more frightened and complicate the training process. Punishment will not help your cat to overcome his fears and accept a frightening situation as non-threatening. Using a desensitizing process will gradually help your pet be less frightened and more confident in his environment.

### **Tips and Hints**

- Never force your pet to interact with something he is afraid of. Trying to show him there is "nothing to be afraid of" will only cause him to experience the situation under extreme stress and possibly make the problem and the fear worse.

- Providing a safe place for your pet such as a spare bedroom where his feeding area and sleeping area can be isolated from the rest of the house is important and allows him to have a comfortable refuge.
- Avoid any new stimulus if your cat is already fearful and keep your pet's routine as normal as possible.
- It will be natural for you to want to comfort your pet if he becomes frightened. However petting or picking up your cat if he is fearful and aroused may cause a scratch or bite. It is best to remove the frightening stimulus and allow the cat to calm down before handling him.
- Always make sure the behavior problem your pet is experiencing is not related to a medical condition and review your pet's problem thoroughly with your vet.
- Helping your pet work through his fear- related issues will take time. There is no "quick fix." Patience will be an important factor in the success of your pet's adjustment and acclimation.