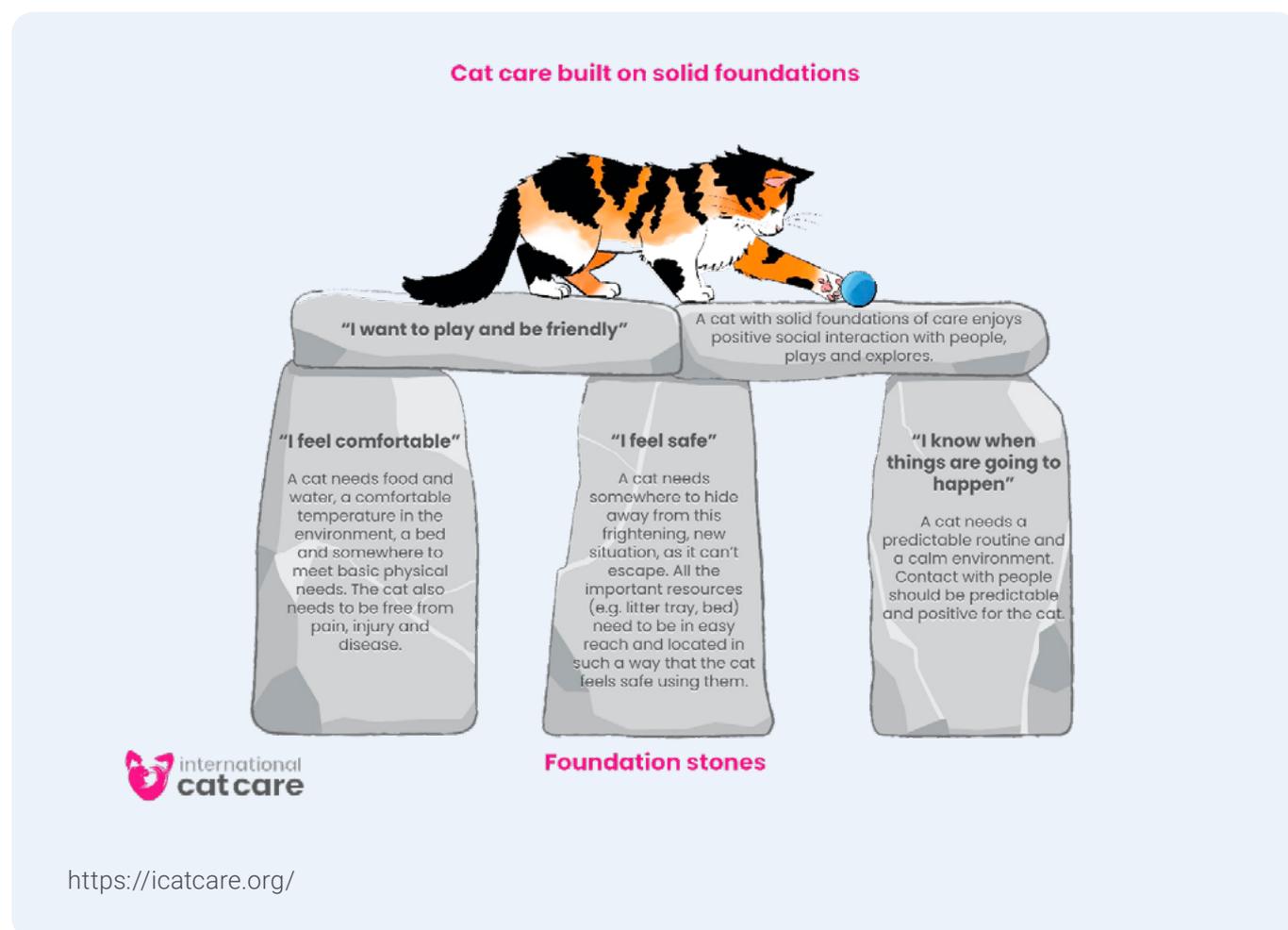


Settling in advice for felines experiencing fear-anxiety

What is fear-anxiety?

Fear and anxiety are important emotions as they ultimately help an individual survive by either anticipating a threat (anxiety) or responding to a threat (fear). However, when these emotions are experienced over prolonged periods, the individual's welfare will be compromised. When caring for felines experiencing fear-anxiety, it is essential to be able to understand the ways in which they can react to these emotions, along with how to respond appropriately. *Only when we have created a comfortable, safe, and predictable environment for the cat will they want to engage with us and their surroundings.*



The most common ways in which felines respond to fear-anxiety

1. Avoidance

What is it, and what does it look like?

Avoidance is generally a cat's first choice in the face of real or perceived danger. They will try to increase distance by moving away from what they are concerned about. At low intensity, this may look like them turning their head away, walking away, jumping up on surfaces at vertical height, or moving to a hidden location. At a higher intensity, they will actively try to escape. You may also observe body language such as dilated pupils, ears rotated back, tense body, tense facial features, and a tail that is bottle brushed and/or held low and tight against their body.

How should you respond?

You should always allow them to retreat from whatever has caused them to respond this way. If you are the stimulus that has triggered this response, immediately increase your distance from them.

It is helpful to create a diary log of any stimulus that triggers this response, including body language observed, the intensity of the response, and how long it takes them to recover. If you have concerns, please contact our RSPCA NSW Behaviour Team mail@rspcansw.org.au or a veterinary behaviourist.

2. Repulsion

What is it, and what does it look like?

Repulsion is a strategy cats use to repel whatever they perceive as a threat in an attempt to increase distance from it. This strategy is often used when avoidance is not possible. Sadly, some individuals can learn over time that avoidance is ineffective and use repulsion strategies as their first choice.

At low intensity, this may look like them staring and blocking entry/exit points (typically in response to conflict with other animals). At a higher intensity, they may hiss/growl, chase, swipe, lunge, or bite.

You may also observe body language such as dilated or constricted pupils, tense facial features, ears forward or pressed back towards the head, rear-end raised higher than the front, or a tense body hunkered down, tail thrashing or tucked tight against their body.

How should you respond?

It is essential to look out for early warning signs that the cat is uncomfortable and to always give them the option to avoid any stimulus (including yourself) so that they do not need to use repulsion strategies to communicate. If repulsion is observed, immediately move the stimulus (including yourself) away from the cat. If injury occurs, promptly complete first aid and consult with a medical professional. The risk of infection is high.

You should create a diary log of any stimulus that triggers this response, including body language observed, the intensity of the response, and how long it takes them to recover. If you have concerns, please contact our RSPCA NSW Behaviour Team mail@rspcansw.org.au or a veterinary behaviourist.

3. Inhibition

What is it, and what does it look like?

This is when cats try very passively to get information about a trigger using their sensory systems (hearing, sight, smell). At low intensity, they will often observe the trigger and try to get enough information to decide how to respond. At a high intensity, they may appear completely immobile or pretend to sleep (feigning sleep). You may also observe body language such as dilated pupils (the eyes may or may not be moving), tense, trembling, or still body, sniffing of the air, an increase in breaths taken per minute, tail tucked or held close to the body, ears back or rotated to any source of sound.

How should you respond?

Signs of inhibition can easily be overlooked, so it is important to pay close attention. If you think they are responding to a stimulus this way, moving the stimulus (including yourself) away from the cat is best.

You should create a diary log of any stimulus that triggers this response, including body language observed, the intensity of the response, and how long it takes them to recover. If you have concerns, please contact our RSPCA NSW Behaviour Team mail@rspcansw.org.au or a veterinary behaviourist

Setting up a comfortable environment

A secure, quiet room should be designated to allow the cat to adjust to their new surroundings slowly. A study or spare bedroom is best – bathrooms, garages, and other cold, dark places should be avoided. If possible, it is best to set up the environment before the cat arrives.

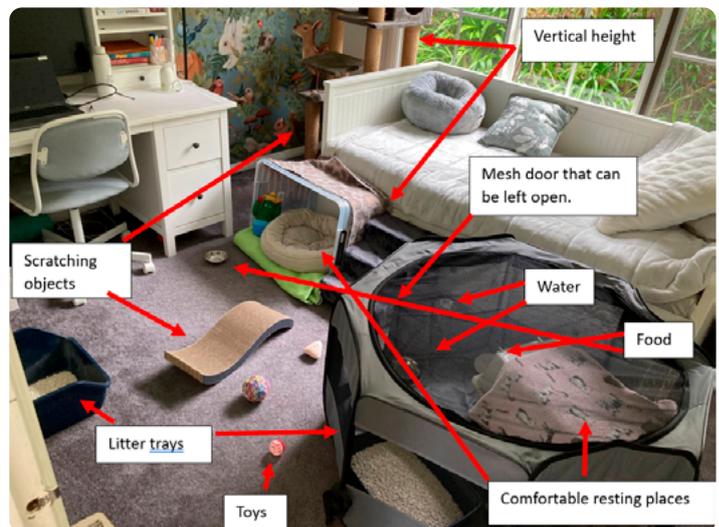
Every cat requires free and immediate access to key resources such as:

- Food
- Water
- Litter trays
- Many hiding/resting spaces both on the ground and at a vertical height
- Items to scratch
- Toys

The more cats you have, the more resources you require; speak to our team for more advice.

Each resource should be separated from the other, particularly litter trays, which should be kept away from food, water, and resting areas.

The room temperature should ideally not be below 23 degrees to provide a warm and comfortable environment.



Provide multiple safe havens

All cats need comfortable places to rest and retreat where they will not be disturbed, so these places should be off-limits to others (including yourself). Adequate sleep/rest is crucial for good physical and emotional health. Hiding is a coping mechanism in stressful situations, so avoid 'seeking out' your cat when they are in these places and allow them to approach you when they feel comfortable enough to do so. You may only need to approach them in these spaces if you believe they are unwell.

As you can see in the previous image, the room appears cluttered. This is intentional to separate resources and because cats generally feel safer in spaces where they have a sense of invisibility.

Provide cat carriers, boxes, cat beds, scratching posts, tall furniture, and other items throughout the room to be used as safe places.

Create predictability

Predictability helps cats cope within their environment as they can anticipate when things will happen. If possible, try to be consistent each day, completing tasks such as cleaning and feeding in the same manner and at the same time.

It is also important to behave consistently; below are some tips on how to do this:

- Use words such as "entering" or "hi kitty" before opening the door to enter the cat's space.
- Ignore them (at least for the first few days). Complete husbandry tasks and leave, or sit far from them, engaging in your own activity (reading, computer work, etc.)
- Move slowly (foot, hand, body movements) – especially during the first few weeks.
- Keep voices and other noises to a minimum – especially during the first few weeks.
- Toss treats from a distance; if they choose to engage, continue to do so, but do not lure them towards you or move closer. They must choose to do this on their own. You should remain as least threatening as possible - if they choose to approach you; avoid eye contact and remain still.
- If appropriate and they chose to approach you, use a word such as "pats?" before offering your hand to see if touch is welcome. Interact with them in the same way every time.

The opportunity to predate

Hunting is a natural behaviour and a pleasurable experience for all cats. Within the home, it can be an opportunity to create a positive experience.

Cats experiencing fear-anxiety are more likely to startle with fast movements and new objects. It is best to avoid large wand toys and those that make loud noises (bells, etc). Start by using a long ribbon or a piece of string. You can then attach feathers or plastic mice to the end as well. The item should be long enough that you can remain a distance away from it when moving it. Move the toy very slowly, away from the cat. Once again, never lure them towards you with it or touch them while they are playing. The goal is for you to remain non-threatening and for them to feel pleasant emotions in your presence. Aim for at least two or three 2–3-minute sessions a day.

Learn more about completing a satisfying hunting experience for your cat by asking our team for a copy of our handout: "A guide to interactive string toy play."

Consent-based touch

When cats feel comfortable in their environment, they may be open to physical touch. The amount and type of touch a cat enjoys varies between individuals. Touch **must** be consensual for it to be perceived as positive by the cat.

When first interacting with a cat, allowing them to approach and rub against you while you remain still is best. Although it is tempting to touch them at this time, it will benefit the relationship in the long term if you can give the cat complete control over contact.

Over time, to determine if the cat is open to petting, simply allow them to approach you, extend your hand in a loosely held fist, and if they rub against it, allow them to guide your hand. After 2-3 seconds, pull your hand away and offer it again at a distance; if they rub against it, they are likely saying, "More, please!". Repeat this multiple times, keeping mostly to the cat's head and cheek area. If at any point they walk away (or do not approach you to begin with), try again another time. They might be more comfortable with treat tosses, string toy play, or passive company at this time.

The Jar of Trust Analogy

When interacting with any feline (or individual, for that matter!), thinking of your relationship with them as a money jar can be helpful. When you first meet them, consider the jar empty.

Each time that you interact with the cat, you are either depositing money into the jar or making a withdrawal. In this analogy, the money within the jar represents trust and relationship building. When there is enough money, the individual feels safe to engage with their environment and is likelier to want to interact with you and perhaps even other individuals.

Negative interactions represent a withdrawal. If you do not have much money in the jar to begin with, negative interactions can be problematic; however, if you have a relatively full jar, withdrawing a few coins shouldn't cause too much damage in the long run if you add more back in than what you previously withdrew. Where withdrawals lead to a negative balance (more withdrawals than deposits), imagine a lid is placed on the jar (temporarily or fixed, depending on the individual and circumstances). This indicates that learning is impaired for the individual, emotional health is compromised, and the relationship cannot grow.

The goal should be to fill the jar with deposits and avoid taking out withdrawals whenever possible.



Deposits may include:

- Giving a sense of invisibility
- Allowing them to retreat when they are uncomfortable
- Sticking to a predictable routine each day
- Tossing treats
- String toy play
- Allowing them to approach
- Allowing them to initiate all contact
- Allowing them to guide your hand to the areas they want to be touched

Withdrawals may include:

- Behaving unpredictably (moving fast, making loud noises)
- Changes to routine
- Relocation to a new environment
- Approaching them
- Touching them without consent
- Handling them in an undesirable way (picking them up off the floor, tight restraint)