

**Helping Your Cat Cope With Change**  
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At one time or another all cats, like all people, have to cope with changes in their lives. The changes may be small, like relatives coming to stay with you for a weekend or they may be large, like a move across the country. Some cats, like some people, adapt well to changes in their lives, others cope very poorly to changes. Many owners report that their older cats seem to adapt more poorly than younger ones.

The reason why some cats do so well with change and others do so poorly is not well understood. Genetic tendencies and the degree of early experience with change as a kitten are probably important. Adult experiences are undoubtedly influential as well. Most indoor cats living as pets probably do not get much positive experience with environmental and social changes. For example, many cats get very upset when taken for a ride in the family auto, probably because most cats do not have many pleasant experiences riding in a car. If a car ride generally results in a trip to the veterinarian, the groomer's or a boarding kennel, the cat will probably come to dread them. Older cats who have had these unpleasant experiences more often than young ones may cope more poorly as time goes on. Also, younger animals in general seem to be more adaptable and flexible than older ones.

It is difficult to give simple rules that will help all cats cope with all kinds of changes, however there are a few general guidelines that may be helpful.

1. Cats seem to cope better with new experiences if exposures are gradual and brief rather than sudden or long-lasting. Brief visits from a new roommate prior to her moving in for example, may make your roommate less threatening than if she moves in without ever having met your cat.
2. New experiences should be as pleasant as possible. Cats should not be forced to experience things that might frighten them. New experiences can be made more pleasant by associating them with food treats, play, petting or other positive activities.
3. Pleasant experiences during early kittenhood can have long-lasting effects. Kittens exposed in a pleasant way to a variety of new places, animals, people or things are less likely to be fearful and more likely to cope better with them later in their lives. Because the socialization period occurs earlier in cats as compared to dogs, this process should be initiated by the breeder, when the kittens are as young as five or six weeks. These socialization experiences can be simple such as having people other than family members gently play with and handle the kittens, allowing them to spend time in parts of the house they may not be familiar with and introducing them to normal everyday stimuli such as the vacuum cleaner and hair dryer.
4. In general, the more varied experiences the cat has had during its lifetime the better it can cope with change, as long as the guidelines mentioned above are followed. Taking

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your cat for rides in the car, visiting new places and meeting new people and animals can help them adapt to new situations throughout life.

5. In cases where the cat must experience sudden, unpleasant, frightening or extreme changes, anti-anxiety drugs may be helpful. Drugs are not a long-term solution to adapting to unpleasant experiences but they may help with short-term adjustments. Drugs are not appropriate in all cases, and with older cats may cause health problems. Drugs should only be given to your cat under the direction of your veterinarian.

Helping cats adjust to environmental changes requires somewhat different approaches than working with social changes. During a move for example, it may be a good idea to try to shield cats from the associated commotion. Putting the cat in a quiet room by herself with all of her necessities and visiting her frequently rather than subjecting her to the disruption of furniture being moved, boxes packed, people in and out of the house may be less stressful. Keep in mind however, that some very confident cats may actually enjoy exploring partially packed boxes, leaping around on furniture that is now in new locations and in general taking things in stride. Attempting to keep the cat's routine the same as possible may also be helpful.

Introducing cats to other animals may need to be a very slow process. Individual cats vary dramatically as to how well they accept new animals into their living space. Conservative introductions are always best, because a first encounter that goes bad can have long lasting effects. Confining one animal in a room and allowing new and resident animals to only hear and smell each other through the door is the place to start. Rather than just confining the newcomer, confine residents as well while allowing the newcomer time to explore. Do not allow more interaction until all animals seem comfortable with these arrangements. Keep in mind that many older cats have gotten in the habit of spending quiet days sleeping in the sunshine and may not appreciate being pestered by a crazy kitten. In some cases though, the antics of a young kitten may rejuvenate an older cat. Owners should carefully evaluate their older cats' life histories, their previous responses to other cats, how playful they have been, and their current health status to determine whether introducing another animal is a good idea.

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