

Helping Shy Animals Overcome Their Fears

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A friend of ours that has a pet sitting business was telling us a story about the cat she was sitting for that she never saw. “I know he’s there because the food is gone and the litterbox has been used” said Sandy. “But I don’t know how to get him to come out and be more friendly”. Shyness around strangers is not uncommon for cats, but even dogs, birds and pet rodents can show this behavior. So how do we get animals to be more friendly?

Shyness is usually a sign of fear and fears of people can develop for lots of different reasons. Sometimes it develops as a result of a bad experience with a person. For example, the dog may have been stepped on accidentally or the cat may have been abused by unthinking children. The animal may not have been exposed to people in pleasant ways when young and as a result of this poor socialization, now is fearful of people. Some animals just seem to have genetic predisposition to be fearful of people.

Regardless of the cause, most fears are dealt with in the same way. Gradual, pleasant exposures to people in non-threatening situations are at the heart of reducing most fears. If people can be associated with really pleasant experiences such as getting a tasty treat or playing with a fun toy, then people become more positive and less fearful for the animal. Our friend could track down the cat, drag him out of his hiding place and show him that she isn’t going to hurt him, but this will not make him more friendly. It will only make him more fearful. Forcing the animal to experience the things that make him afraid usually only make him more afraid.

Sandy would do better to be patient and wait quietly in the house for the cat to appear on his own and then try to lure him near her by offering him some tasty food or a toy to play with. If the cat wants to sit far away from her or wants to leave on his own, he should be allowed to do it. It could take hours or even days for the cat to begin to come to her and even with more pleasant experiences, the cat may never be really friendly. Overcoming fears can take a lot of time and effort and even with the most careful work animals may not totally overcome them. However, most animals can be made less fearful and less shy with love, patience and persistence.