

You're the Proud Owner of a (Formerly) Homeless Cat And she's hiding under the bed

Some of the cats in our adoption program have had the good fortune of spending time in a foster home; therefore that kitty has been socialized: touched and loved by human hands; nurtured, supported and assessed to be ready for a permanent home with an adoptive parent. Other cats in our program we know little about other than they are homeless (usually abandoned) sometimes abused; a kind caregiver has brought them to our spay/neuter/vaccinate clinic and requested that we try to place them in a safe home.

Just as we humans are products of our backgrounds and childhoods, a homeless kitty is still connected to her homeless roots. And, just like humans who sometimes regress to childhood emotions when they're stressed or frightened (did you ever have a bad day and want to crawl under the covers or eat "comfort food" for dinner?), a stressed and frightened kitty might instinctually return to homeless behavior in the face of a threat.

What does this mean for you, the new adoptive parent? Firstly, it's important to prepare yourself for a different and possibly challenging experience when you first bring home your new kitty. If you've previously adopted never-lived-on-the-street cats who walked into your house and just made themselves right at home, you need to erase those images. **It is the rare homeless kitty who will acclimate right away, and it's not fair to the kitty or yourself to have unrealistic expectations.**

The key to a successful transition is PATIENCE, PATIENCE and more PATIENCE. You need to accept the fact that this process will be governed by the kitty's schedule, not yours. Kitty will let you know when she's ready to move to the next stage -- you can't force it. Always try to keep in mind that the reward for your patience, and for what can feel like a frustrating, exasperating process, is an enduring, loving, and trusting bond between you and your new cat. With that in mind, here are some suggestions for your first days and possibly weeks with kitty:

- ♥ **ISOLATION: A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN** make sure you put your kitty into a separate enclosed room. Its fine if it's small (e.g. a bathroom) - and in some cases, smaller is preferable. Check the room first for any possible dangers, e.g. exposed wires, toxic substances, hanging drapery cords, holes in screens, etc.) Set up kitty's bedding, food and water bowls, litter box, toys and scratching post in the room.
- ♥ **A HIDING PLACE (or two!)** Make sure there's some way for kitty to hide in that room. Homeless instinct requires a hiding place in order to feel safe. The kitty needs to know that they can get away from a perceived threat (such as their new owner!) For example, if it's a bedroom, put some fleece or bedding under a bed or in a closet. In a bathroom, perhaps you can put a small box or bed behind a bathtub or toilet. Most likely, your kitty will let you know right away where she wants to hide and you can set up cozy bedding in that area. Some formerly homeless cats like to hide underneath things, and some prefer to be high up. (Again, remember the life of some homeless cats - when they see humans, some of them flee to the rooftops, some of them hide beneath buildings or cars...) **Whatever you do, do not force your kitty out of her safe space!** NOTE: socialized homeless cats can panic if they feel backed into a corner or without an escape route. If, for example, you approach kitty when she's backed into a wall, she can feel trapped and may start running around the room in a desperate search for safety. It's good to be aware of this.
- ♥ **RESPECT BOUNDARIES** If you're lucky, your kitty will let you pet her while she's in her safe space. This may require some gymnastics on your part (e.g. you may have to lie on your belly and stretch to reach her under a bed), but if she's receptive to the physical contact, it's an important part of the bonding process. If she's not, don't force it. Persistence, however, is fine. Try again later that day and the next day, but back off if she seems too scared. The same rules apply to play - let her go after those wand toys, Kitty Teasers, etc. from the safety of her hiding place. Interactive toys are best (i.e. toys that you have to operate!) because the joint play is part of the bonding process. Be sure to use a soft, gentle voice when you and kitty are interacting.
- ♥ **WALKING ON EGGSHELLS** Try to be aware of things that frighten formerly homeless cats: sudden movements, loud noises, loud voices, and strangers. It's good for you to introduce kitty to all the members of your household, but do it gently - one person at a time. And make sure each person reads this sheet and understands the guidelines. Chances are, kitty may feel safest and bond most quickly with you, the primary adoptive parent, and that's fine. But what you want to avoid is a kitty that *only* feels safe with you and flees at the sound of your spouse, partner, or child. NOTE: The first week is NOT the time to introduce kitty to all your friends. It's tempting to show off the new addition, but again, trust that there will be time for this later on.
- ♥ **GRADUALLY EXPAND THE BOUNDARIES** after a couple of days, you might try seeing if you can coax kitty out of hiding with toys and/or food. If, for example, she loves to chase a Kitty Tease, try to get her to chase it outside of the safety zone. If she's a kitty who loves pouncing on feather toys if they're under her bedding, try putting a towel several feet away from her (in the non-safety zone) and stick the feather toy under it. Try changing toys so that something new and different is outside the safety zone. The same goes for food. Keep her on the same food for the first few days, but then try a little canned food, tuna juice or baby food (buy a brand without onion powder in it) to entice her to leave her hiding place. (Check her litter box the next day to

make sure it didn't upset her tummy.) You might also try setting up a cozy bed outside of the safety zone and see if she'll start using that as a second home.

- ♥ **PATIENCE PATIENCE PATIENCE - OR, HOW LONG WILL THIS GO ON?** You may find that just when you're making progress, something spooks kitty and she's back in hiding. It can be maddening to be petting her, or finally holding her in your lap, when suddenly she flees, and all you did was look at your watch or rustle your pants leg! Just trust that you *are* making progress and things will indeed change. The amount of time will vary with each kitty. **Some may be fine after a day, some may need two weeks, and some may need a month.** Hang in there if your kitty's one of the ones who's taking a long time. Just keep trying to have bonding moments with her, and tell yourself the wait will be worth it in the end.
- ♥ **FOLLOW KITTY'S CUES (SHE'S THE BOSS!)** Your kitty will let you know when she's ready to explore the rest of your house. She may start playing near the door, coming out of hiding more often or acting restless and bored. Experiment - open the door and see what happens. Again, don't ever grab her and try to make her leave the room - but coax her and encourage her. You can again try the food and toy method, enticing her with goodies outside the room.
- ♥ **A NOTE ABOUT OTHER PETS** The basic rules of introducing pets to the new kitty still apply here - keep them separate, let them smell and hear each other through the closed door, give it time. With a socialized homeless cat, however, we recommend that you invite your other pets, one at a time, into the kitty's room. Don't just rely on the new kitty to leave the room and introduce herself. In some cases, you may find that the kitty is more comfortable and outgoing around your other cats than she is with you! Remember, that's homeless instinct at work - their first companions and neighbors were cats, not humans. Patience is important with this process as well. Depending on the personality of your other pets, there may be hissing or growling. Monitor the two animals to make sure no one gets hurt, but give them the space to explore each other. Try short sessions and then repeat them as necessary.

If you follow the above guidelines, hopefully that day will come when kitty is now an integrated member of your household. Maybe you wanted that day to come earlier, but at least it's finally here! She's playing in your living room, she's in your lap or sitting next to you on the couch, she's eating in the kitchen; she's sleeping in your bed. She may always be a kitty who does a fifty-yard dash when the doorbell rings or lightening strikes, but remember that this is just part of what makes her special!