

The Eye Signal That Says You've Made Friends With a Strange Cat

Cats tend to be shy with strangers, and humans tend to make a myriad of mistakes in greeting wary cats. But, these tricks of the trade can help you engage with a shy or wary cat. If they do this with their eyes, you'll know you've won them over. Or your guest has won your cat over.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cats can be hard to get to know, especially when strangers don't know how to approach them
- Your kitty's response to unfamiliar people will depend on several factors, including genetics and socialization
- You can help guests to your home forge a positive relationship with your cat by following a few simple guidelines

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published November 30, 2015.

If you've spent any time around cats, you know they are often simultaneously irresistible and untouchable (literally). How could such a gorgeous, soft, and purring creature be so hard to get to know?

There's a right and a wrong way to greet a cat, especially one who is unfamiliar with you, and giving in to the urge to snatch up that beautiful silky creature and shower her with kisses almost always falls into the "wrong way" category.

If you're owned by a cat, you've probably had guests to your home take a too-direct approach with little Garfield or Miss Fluffybutt, only to have your kitty bolt from the room and hide under the bed for the rest of the visit.

And since many cat guardians are unaware of the signs of feline stress, you may have added insult to injury by trying to comfort kitty by dragging her from her safe place and holding her too tightly, or for too long.

According to a survey conducted by Cats Protection, a feline welfare organization in the UK, more than half the people surveyed said they try to calm their stressed cats by cuddling them, which is actually the opposite of what kitties want and need when they're feeling anxious or fearful.

"Being held or stroked for too long can be very stressful for some cats," says Nicky Trevorrow of Cats Protection.

"Space and peace is often what they need — they're not small furry humans so what would comfort us won't necessarily comfort them."¹

Genetics and Socialization Play a Role in How Cats React to Strangers

It's important to keep in mind that each cat is an individual, and will respond in his or her own way to strangers and unfamiliar stimuli in the environment. Some extroverted kitties will happily greet visitors at the door, for example, while others will head for their safe place as soon as the doorbell rings.

There are many factors involved in a cat's behavior, with socialization and genetics being two of the most important. How and when a kitten is socialized will affect how she responds to visitors.

If she spent her first few months of life in a shelter kennel with minimal exposure to other cats and people, she will probably be uncomfortable around unfamiliar guests to your home.

If your cat's parents were feral or stray, she may have a genetic predisposition toward fearful behavior.

Whatever the cause of her wariness around strangers, you can help create a better relationship between your feline companion and family and friends who visit your home by offering your guests a few simple tips on how to make a positive impression on your kitty.

Cat-Greeting Etiquette

The mistake many people make is in approaching a cat as they would another person. A fearful or wary cat will be further intimidated by a head-on approach — especially if the person is also looking directly at him. Children can be especially direct, and if they're also moving quickly or talking loudly, it's doubly disturbing to a fearful cat.

Here are some general guidelines for greeting a **shy cat** in a way that will help him feel more comfortable:

- When dealing with a particularly cautious kitty, try ignoring her initially and avoid eye contact. Wait to see if she comes to you. If she does, try gently scratching her head or neck.
- This may seem strange, but the goal is to appear entirely nonthreatening to the cat. Instead of directly facing her, turn your body to the side, avoid eye contact, and "shrink" yourself by kneeling or sitting.

Don't reach for the cat or hover over her. If she seems curious about you, extend your hand slowly in her direction, without reaching for her, and let her sniff you.

- Give kitty space and let him decide if he wants to interact with you. If he approaches you, don't immediately reach for him. Instead, let him set the pace. If he rubs up against you, it's a signal that he may be ready for some gentle petting.
- Some cats are more willing to let strangers approach if they're off the floor, for example, perched on the couch or a cat tree.
- Don't be hesitant to use food treats and interactive toys to entice a fearful cat to interact with you.
- Try a slow, intentional blink to communicate to the cat that you mean him no harm. When a cat closes his eyes in your presence, he is communicating that he trusts you. If and when kitty returns your slow blink, you've made a friend!

Some kitties take longer than others to warm up. And some, unfortunately, will never reach a level of comfort that allows you to handle them.

The most important thing to remember about cats is their need to feel in control of their immediate surroundings. Allow kitty to set the tone for all your interactions with her — it will help her feel confident and in control.

Cat-Handling Etiquette

- **The proper way to pet a cat** — There's a right and a wrong way to pet a cat. The right way is with an open hand and a soft, gentle stroke. The wrong way involves poking, pulling, or grabbing of any kind. Touch the cat only on her back, shoulders, neck, and the top of the head — the paws, tail, and tummy are off-limits.
- **The proper way to hold a cat** — Avoid sudden, unpredictable moves, as cats don't take kindly to surprises. Suddenly grabbing up and restraining a surprised cat is a good way to get scratched or bitten. It also tends to send the cat scurrying each time she sees you approaching.

Allow the cat to do things her way, in her own time. Forcing a cat to do anything is counterproductive.

- **The proper way to pick up a cat** — Place one hand under the chest and the other supporting the rear legs to lift the cat's weight evenly. Gently hold the cat against your upper body for added balance and to make her feel more secure. As soon as the cat wants down — she may push away, look toward the floor, move her ears backward, or twitch her tail — immediately and gently lower her to the floor or another stable surface.

Sources and References

[VetStreet](#)

¹ [Cats Protection](#)
