

# Fear of Sounds

By Karen Sueda, DVM

## Why is my cat fearful of certain noises?

Fearful cats are often alarmed by certain sounds, such as the doorbell ringing, someone knocking, the vacuum running, or a heavy item being dropped. Some sounds, such as the doorbell ringing, signal that other frightening events (e.g., visitors arriving) are about to occur. Other noises are loud, sudden and unexpected (e.g., the vacuum revving up). Because of their underlying fearful or anxious temperament, “scaredy cats” may not recover as quickly as other cats or may display an exaggerated response to these sounds.



## How can I make my cat more comfortable around these sounds?

One way is to use the behavior modification techniques called desensitization and counter-conditioning. (Please refer to the resource called “Using Behavior Modification to Help Your Cat” for general information about these training techniques.)

Before you start the exercises, you’ll need to prevent reinforcement of the anxious behavior. So, you’ll want to provide your cat with a “safe room” to go to before the fear-inducing sounds occur. The safe area should be an out-of-the-way location, such as a back room, where the sound of someone knocking or the vacuum running is muffled. Your fearful cat should feel calm and relaxed in the safe area. Depending on the duration of her stay, the room should be set up ahead of time with comfortable resting areas, a bowl of water and a litter box. Once you’ve put your cat inside, provide her with a special food treat, interactive toy or food-dispensing toy to distract her and create positive associations with the muffled noises that will come through the door.

Depending on the noise that your cat fears, you’ll want to prepare her for the exercises by doing the following for a period of time:

**Knocking or doorbell ringing.** A few minutes before guests arrive, take your cat to the safe room. It may help to ask guests to call you as they approach your home so they do not have to ring the doorbell or knock.

**Vacuuming.** Take your cat to the safe room before you begin vacuuming. Pinning a blanket over the door or at the base of the door may help further muffle the noise. If you vacuum often, alternate using a smaller hand vacuum or a manual carpet sweeper on some days or in certain locations.

**Phone ringing.** If your phone offers a volume-adjustment feature, turn down the volume. Changing the ring tone may also help (e.g., changing from a ring to a buzz). Phones

that light up or alert you via a personal signaling device are also available. (These were originally designed for the hearing-impaired.)

**Sudden, loud, or unexpected noises.** These are inherently difficult to anticipate or avoid. However, providing alternative hiding places in various locations within your house may encourage your cat to stay nearby (rather than running to a back room) and emerge quicker (rather than falling asleep in the hiding location). Hiding places can be created by adding skirts around chairs or tables, cutting two holes in a large cardboard box and placing it in a secluded area, or screening off a room corner and creating a sheltered spot.

## **How do I use behavior modification to make my cat less fearful?**

Over multiple sessions, you will get your cat used to the alarming noise by gradually increasing the volume of the sound or decreasing the distance between your cat and the sound source until she is able to remain completely relaxed while the sound occurs at its typical volume. Initially, the fear-inducing sound will be muffled, played at a very low volume, or at a great distance. Besides treats, toys or other rewards for your cat, you may also need the help of a friend in certain cases. (You can use a cell phone to call your home phone, but you may need a friend to turn the vacuum on for you.)

You should only work with one sound at a time. Wait until your cat seems comfortable with one sound before working on another. Here are the steps to follow:

**1. Decide how you will decrease the volume of the sound.** There are three ways that you can alter the volume:

*Muffling.* The sound source can be covered with a heavy blanket, pillow, or towel. The source can be gradually uncovered as your cat becomes desensitized to the noise.

*Distance.* The distance between your cat and the sound source can be manipulated. For example, start the exercises with your cat in a different room than the phone or vacuum with several closed doors between them. Slowly decrease the distance between your cat and the sound.

*Tape-recording.* Sounds can be tape-recorded or audio clips can be downloaded from the Internet (visit [www.findsounds.com](http://www.findsounds.com)) and burned onto a CD. The tape or CD can be played and the volume adjusted accordingly.

**2. Find a starting volume (or distance).** You'll begin the exercises at the volume (or distance) at which your cat does not exhibit any sign of anxiety, arousal or aggression when the sound is played. Your cat should appear completely calm and feel safe when the sound is played at this level or distance. The actual starting volume depends on your cat's temperament, the type of sound presented and the distance from the sound source. For example, the starting volume may need to be lower if the sound you're working on is the vacuum running rather than someone knocking on the door.

For very timid cats, just the sight of the sound source (e.g., the vacuum) may cause them to be fearful. In these cases, start the exercises in a place where your cat does not see the sound source. You can also work on getting your cat comfortable around the

sight of the vacuum or other sound source by feeding her treats near the sound source without turning it on.

**3. Start behavior modification.** Play the sound at the starting volume or distance and watch your cat's behavior and body language very closely. As long as she remains calm and non-anxious, reward this behavior with treats (e.g., a plate of canned food), play or petting. Continue this activity for a few minutes, then end the session with a reward. You can do several short sessions throughout the day.

**4. Increase the volume (or decrease the distance).** After several sessions, you will notice your cat becoming more accustomed to hearing the sound played at a low volume. Increase the sound slightly by un-muffling the sound source, moving the sound source closer to the cat, or raising the volume on the sound system. Again, monitor your cat closely for any signs of anxiety. If she remains calm, repeat the session a few times. Then, over many sessions, gradually and incrementally increase the volume of the sound or decrease the distance between your cat and the sound.

**5. If your cat becomes anxious.** If you notice your cat displaying signs of anxiety, move her further away from the sound or decrease the volume until she is no longer fearful. Then reward the calm behavior to end the session on a positive note. Start the next session at this "safe" distance or volume. When you start to decrease the distance or increase the volume, do so in smaller increments than you did before.

**6. Add in other elements.** Once your cat is comfortable eating or playing while the sound is being played at a "normal" level, you can repeat the exercises with different sounds or add in different situations (e.g., having a stranger at the door when the doorbell rings). Your cat's ability to generalize and display calm behavior around a variety of sounds and situations will depend on how often you can repeat these exercises and add in different elements.

Try to keep in mind that these exercises take time, and progress may be slow. Just remember that, overall, your efforts are helping to improve your cat's quality of life. In some cases, anti-anxiety medication may help to facilitate behavior modification. If you have questions about desensitization and counter-conditioning exercises or how to apply them to your cat, please consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist.

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See also: [Using Behavior Modification to Help Your Cat](#)