

This scale assesses behavior observed in the moment; it does not assess stable traits, nor should it be used to make statements about a cat's personality.

Fear may overlap with aggression. If a cat escalates to the point where there is concern for human safety, please refer to the Feline Risk Assessment.

Neutral

Body

- Body is relaxed
- Eyes are almond shaped with a soft gaze; pupil size is appropriate for the ambient lighting
- Ears are in a relaxed position: forward or turned slightly outward
- Whiskers may droop loosely
- Tail is likely not moving or, at most, moves slowly and intermittently back and forth; tail hangs naturally or is held upright in a curved position

Behavior

- Appears relaxed and may slowly blink eyes
- May look at a stimulus with little to no interest
- If engaging with a stimulus, shows interest while staying calm
- Easy to handle

Mild Fear (FAS 1-2)

Note: FAS refers to the Fear Free Shelters® Spectrum of Fear, Anxiety, or Stress handout. FAS does not perfectly correlate with ASPCA's Fear Scale but has been loosely categorized within this scale for teams who routinely refer to FAS.

Body

- Body may be intermittently tense
- Normal respiratory rate and may purr
- If moving, body carriage may be slightly lowered, and tail may be down
- If stationary, limbs may be tucked under body with tail wrapped close to body
- Eyes may be round and open or partially shut; pupils may be partially dilated
- Ears are forward, turned slightly to the side, or swiveling back and forth

- Whiskers may be held naturally or pulled back
- Tail may be parallel to spine, down, or wrapped close to body

Behavior

- Alert; may show some interest (look at, sniff, air scent the stimulus)
- May be silent (no vocalizations), meow, or purr
- May yawn, avert gaze, lick lips, fidget, pace, or scratch or groom
- Body weight may be shifted away from the stimulus
- May move slowly around the environment, with lowered body and tail, or may remain in place (e.g., inside the carrier)
- The cat may vacillate between approaching and moving away from the stimulus or may approach the stimulus hesitantly with a low, stretched-out body
- If the cat does not approach the stimulus, may watch from a hiding spot or from a distance
- May briefly freeze, lean away, move away, or orient quickly toward the person in response to being reached for or touched
- Can be easily distracted, but will likely continue to monitor the stimulus
- May flinch or startle briefly
- Fear quickly decreases when the stimulus is removed

Moderate Fear (FAS 2-3)

Body

- Body is tense or stiff
- Respiratory rate is faster than resting rate
- If moving, body carriage is lowered, tail hangs down or is tucked under or against body
- If stationary, limbs are tucked in or held in a rigid position; head is pulled in toward shoulders or held low
- If the cat is alert, eyes are round and wide open with pupils dilated
- If the cat is nonresponsive, eyes may be closed or squinting with gaze averted
- Ears are back, partially flattened, or swiveling back and forth
- Whiskers may be pulled back
- Tail may be low or wrapped against the body; tail may twitch, fur raised (piloerect)

Behavior

- Alert and aware of the surroundings
- May be silent (no vocalizations), meow, huff, or purr; may briefly hiss or growl
- May tremble
- May lick lips or drool
- Body weight may be shifted away from the stimulus
- May remain motionless or actively avoid the stimulus
- If the cat is hiding, may ignore the stimulus or stretch forward to sniff the stimulus from a distance
- May move around the space with a low, crouched body, as though seeking an escape route or place to hide; not panicking
- May approach the stimulus tentatively, with a tense body and crouched posture; may stretch to investigate the stimulus while keeping body weight shifted towards their back end, followed by running away or hiding
- If the cat is hiding, may ignore the stimulus or stretch forward to sniff the stimulus from a distance
- If approached, may initially or intermittently hiss or growl
- May evade being touched, but if unable to evade, may flinch, tense up and remain motionless, or adopt a defensive posture (e.g., arched back, positioned sideways, downward curved tail, raised front paw)
- If handled, may run away and/or hide afterward
- May startle or flinch in response to sounds or movements in the environment; may take a few minutes to recover

Severe Fear (FAS 4-5)

Body

- Body is extremely tense/rigid
- Respiratory rate is extremely fast
- If moving, head is low and body is touching the ground, as if crawling
- If stationary, may be in a crouched, flattened position with head tucked into body, or in a tight ball with all limbs tucked in
- Eyes are either round and fully open with pupils dilated or constricted, or squeezed shut
- Ears are flattened, either pointed sideways or pulled back
- Whiskers are pulled back
- Tail is tucked or wrapped tightly against the body, held down, or curled inward If stationary, limbs are tucked in or held

Behavior

- May stare directly at the stimulus
- May be silent (no vocalizations), huff or purr; may hiss, growl, yowl, spit, or scream
- May tremble
- May lick lips, pant, or drool
- May shift weight away from the stimulus, positioned to make body appear smaller
- May seem “stuck” in a position (sitting, standing in place, or lying down)
- May be alert and looking around the space with wide, round eyes, especially when forced into proximity with the stimulus
- May be catatonic or feigning sleep (seeming completely unaware or unresponsive, in an expressionless, motionless state)
- May remain hidden or try to hide underneath or behind objects, or cram body against the wall or into a corner, with head pulled inward
- May freeze in a defensive posture (e.g., arched back, positioned sideways, downward curved tail, raised front paw), fur may be raised (piloerect)
- May flee around the space in a panic, persistently try to escape, or pace back and forth
- May become defensively aggressive (e.g., prolonged hissing or growling, lunge, spit, swat, bite, etc.), particularly if there is no opportunity for escape
- May lose control of bladder or bowels, or release anal glands
- If a person is doing something in close proximity or is trying to handle the cat, the person may need to stop due to a safety or welfare concern
- May startle easily and/or intensely and may redirect aggression onto an object, animal, or person in close proximity
- May remain in an agitated state long after the stimulus is removed, possibly for several hours