

My Cat Fears the Ceiling Fan

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, discusses how to desensitize cats to a frightening object.

By Marilyn Krieger

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Q: One month ago we installed a ceiling fan in our living room. Ever since then our cat, Tigger, has been avoiding that room along with the rest of the house. Tigger hid the first few days, but then took up residence in the guest bedroom, where he is now. At first I thought that he would come out of the room for food and to use the litterbox, but he hasn't, so I put a litterbox and food for him in the guest room. He used to love lying on the dining-room table and cuddling with me at night.

What to do to get him back to his old behavior? Shall I continue to feed him and keep a litterbox in the guest room and let him take his time emerging from there or should I remove those, and let hunger force him out?

A: There are a few possible triggers that are causing Tigger to be afraid of the ceiling fan. One theory concerning ceiling fans and cats is that the movement, shape and/or color of the fan may be reminiscent of a flying predator. If the fan blades are a color that contrasts against the ceiling, the color, along with the movement might be scaring Tigger. Additionally, the sound and air movement generated by the fan may be triggering his fear response. Another factor to consider is that something may have occurred while the fan was being installed that initially scared Tigger. He may now have a fear association with the fan because of the incident.

Desensitization, counter-conditioning and if necessary, altering the fan blade color can help Tigger overcome his fear. If you think the color of the fan blades are causing his response, consider putting covers on the blades that closely match the color of the ceiling. Many home improvement stores carry them.

Food and play will also help desensitize/counter-condition Tigger to the fan. Start by turning the fan off and leaving it off until he's overcome his fear. Use treats that Tigger loves to gradually lure him from his sanctuary. Every time you go in his room, throw him a treat. The treats should gradually be tossed closer to the entrance of the room. If Tigger likes to play, use a fishing pole toy, playing with him in a way that takes him close to the open door and then outside of his safe room. Keep luring him with food and play until he's comfortable with playing and eating treats at the entrance of the room that houses the fan. If he runs back to his sanctuary, don't despair, start over; this time proceed slower.

The next step will be easier to do with a friend. After Tigger is secure with playing and eating treats at the entrance of the ceiling-fan room, slowly move the fan blades by hand. Do this by either standing on a chair or by tying a strong string on one of the blades. While slowly rotating the fan, your friend should either give treats to Tigger or play with him. Gradually increase the speed of the fan. At first the sessions may be short. As Tigger becomes used to the fan, the sessions should increase in time.

After Tigger is comfortable with the fan being moved by hand, turn it on the lowest speed available. Meantime, Tigger needs to be distracted with play and/or treats both while it's being turned on and while the fan is in motion. If Tigger becomes frightened, start over, proceeding slower, at a pace that Tigger is comfortable with.