

Enslaved by Felinophobia

Understanding people who fear cats is the first step toward freedom. Learn how you can help a person with felinophobia.

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"Basically, leave the person alone about the problem," Wilson said. "Don't degrade him or her and don't talk to the person like a child. Don't make suggestions and, most of all, don't tell him or her to relax. Doing all these things will make the person feel misunderstood. Instead, read articles about phobias, so you'll have more information. If you want to help, ask the person to tell you how he or she is feeling, and help them cat-proof their environment. Don't try to talk them out of their fear."

While Wilson doesn't believe you should go out of your way to restructure your home to accommodate a felinophobic friend or relative, it's important to keep the problem in perspective. "People with this phobia have been made to feel ashamed. If you want to help them, treat them with compassion and respect."

"The worst thing friends and family members of felinophobes can do is make fun of the person who suffers or try to expose them to cats without his or her approval," Bassett said. "Do not run out and buy a gift kitten in attempt to warm him or her to the idea of cats. If you do, be prepared to own a new kitten. The best support you can give your loved one who suffers with felinophobia is to take his or her fear seriously."

Some people are eager to get help for the problem, while others appear not quite ready to face it. "If the person is not looking to tackle the problem at the moment, just help him or her avoid cats," Wilson said. "Arrange to meet him or her in a neutral cat-free environment."

Second, for those looking to confront their felinophobia, there is hope. Treatment involves gradual desensitization to cats. This can be done with the assistance of a therapist.

"Cognitive behavioral therapy is the treatment of choice for phobias," Wilson said. "Specific phobias like felinophobia cannot be treated with medication. The most current way of treating this problem is to help the patient stay with his or her fearful feelings and maintain the stress level at increasing intensity. The person begins to tolerate more and more exposure until the fear eventually subsides."

Wilson points out this treatment is done gradually, starting with something as seemingly benign as looking at a picture book of cats, to holding a stuffed cat, then standing outside a facility where cats are caged and then going in a friend's house with a cat in the next room.