

BASE CAMP

(information from Jackson Galaxy's television shows, books, lectures and Youtube videos)

Living in a shelter is difficult for animals. Imagine how you'd feel living in a large room with strangers. Your cat is already extra-sensitive, fearful and/or agitated from being in the shelter. Now, it has to adjust to you - a new person - and a new home.

Cats define themselves by territory. It's crucial to their well-being that they have confident ownership of their territory. That's why Jackson Galaxy urges people to create a base camp for a new cat whether it's your only cat or joining a home with several pets.

Do not plop the cat in the middle of your home as soon as you bring it home from the shelter. A cat's first instinct in a new situation is to hide until it figures out if it's in a safe place. When you take your new cat out of its carrier, it's going to run to a hiding spot and stay there perhaps for days. We've had adopters tell us their new cat hid behind the plumbing under the sink or got into the ceiling or behind a wall or dug into the underside of the couch. The only way the adopter knows the cat is still alive is it eats and uses the litter box in the middle of the night.

You can avoid all this stress for you and your cat if you start the cat in its own base camp room. The cat relaxes as its scent fills the room while it learns the smells and sounds of the rest of the home. The base camp needs a litter box, food & water dishes, a scratching post and/or cat tower, blankets and toys.

Your bedroom is the ideal base camp because it's where your odor is the strongest. A bathroom is another option. Just remember that if you put a kitten in a bathroom, close the toilet lid to prevent drowning.

Spend as much time as you can with your cat during the first few days. Try playing with it, but don't push the cat if it's frightened. Instead, talk to the cat in a soft voice. Reading aloud is therapeutic. (It doesn't matter what you read; your mail or a book has the same effect.) Our voices are a soothing drone when we read aloud instead of the range of tones when we're talking to someone. Be aware of your posture; are your legs blocking what your cat perceives as an escape route? Make yourself as small as possible when sitting on the floor with your cat.

Don't invite a lot of visitors to the cat's base camp. Stressed cats have a heightened sense of their fight/flight response. They can't handle being overwhelmed by a lot of people. Imagine how you would feel in a room of strangers who insisted on hugging you.

The final element of settling your cat into your home is de-camping. Your cat will show you when it's ready to leave base camp by walking out of the room. If the cat doesn't want to leave, don't force it out of the room. Some cats are ready overnight, some in a few days; some - because of their history - need several weeks. After the cat is comfortable in your home, slowly move the litter box a few feet a day to its new location. Move the cat's blankets, dishes, cat tower and toys around your home.

You only have one chance to introduce your new cat to your life and home. Take your time. What's a few extra hours or days in the years you will spend together?