

BEHAVIOR

Reading Cat Body Language: Stress, Fear and Trust

Ears, tail, eyes and posture tell you how a cat feels, and how to approach a frightened community cat without causing harm.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 15, 2026 • 1 min read • 3 cited sources

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Read the whole cat

No single signal tells the whole story. Look at ears, eyes, tail and posture together, and at what is happening around the cat.

Relaxed or friendly

- Ears up and facing forward
- Tail held up, sometimes with a curved tip
- Soft eyes and slow blinks. Many cats return a slow blink: try it from a distance.
- Loose body; may approach or rub against objects

Stressed or frightened

- Ears turned sideways or flattened back
- Tail low, tucked, or wrapped around the body; puffed when very frightened
- Crouched low, body tense; may freeze or hide
- Wide pupils (also caused by dim light or play, so read the context)
- Hissing, growling, or a tail lashing side to side: give the cat space

Approaching a community cat

- Move slowly, crouch or sit sideways, and avoid staring.
- Let the cat choose to approach. Never corner it or reach for it.
- Feed at a consistent time and place; trust builds with routine.
- Never handle a frightened or feral cat with bare hands. Bites need medical attention.

Sources

1. PetMD — How to Read a Cat's Body Language

<https://www.petmd.com/cat/behavior/cat-body-language>

2. AAFP & ISFM — Feline Behavior Guidelines (PDF)

<https://catvets.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/FelineBehaviorGLS.pdf>

3. Alley Cat Allies — Stray, Feral, and Pet Cats

<https://www.alleycat.org/community-cat-care/whats-the-difference-between-stray-feral-and-pet-cats/>