



# Using food restriction to get your scared or semi-feral cat to bond with you

Some cats are reluctant to befriend humans simply because they've never had a *reason* to bond with them. If a cat has all of it's basic needs met - shelter, food and water, then why on earth do they need *you* in their lives? If an animal is food-driven, we can change their opinion about humans by manipulating that one basic need. Below are some guidelines we've used to bring scared or semi-feral cats out of their shells.

This intensive process takes up to a week. Cutting back an animal's regular ration of food for more than that is not suggested but the process can be repeated as needed with a week or two in between.

You'll need to choose a bathroom, or another small room where the cat cannot hide (like under a bed). If you have other cats, don't introduce them at this time - they can smell each other under the door, which is enough for now. You're going to have to be down on the cats level as much as possible, so if you can't sit on the floor, put a low footstool in the room with the cat. You will be using dry food only, plus special treats, preferably in the form of a roast chicken breast torn into thin strips. You have to find a food she *LOVES* for this to work. Store bought cat treats aren't tempting enough, so try the chicken breast - whole and easy to tear, grilled, whatever. I had a cat once that wouldn't go for the chicken but I found pot roast strips of meat did the trick. This plan sounds drastic, but it works. Stick to it - and no cheating, the results are worth it.

Leave the cat in the confinement room and give her water, a cardboard box and blanket for a bed, plus a litter box. Leave her a small handful (1/4 cup of dry kibble) of food in her bowl, and don't give her any more for 24 hours. You can go in and talk nice to her during this 24 hours, but don't try to touch her - just get her used to your being in there, sitting on the stool for a few minutes at a time and hearing your voice.

After the 24 hours, you switch to "4-times a day mode," where you can try this: Go in with the chicken. Hold it out to her. Don't give it to her unless she comes and takes it from your hand. Don't let her swat it out of your hand. She must take it nicely with her mouth. The first few times she may only sniff it, or look at you. If she won't come to you, toss her only ONE TINY piece of chicken (so she knows what she's missing) then leave her with a dozen dry kibbles in her bowl. Repeat this about 4 times a day. By the second day, she should be coming to you for the chicken because she is VERY hungry, and she knows she's only going to get it if she takes it from your hand. If she doesn't, remember, only a dozen or so kibbles at a time - no cheating. You literally have to break her stubborn nature, and this will work. If you feel sorry for her and fill that food bowl, the only thing she's learned is to "out-wait you" and all your hard work is ruined.

Once she's taking chicken from your hand, make sure the other hand is hanging around near her while she's taking the chicken from you. Your goal is to start petting her with one hand, as she takes the chicken from the other. She learns touch/petting is a 'good' thing when she gets the 'good' chicken. Once she starts taking chicken from you, give her as much as she wants - one piece at a time - and as long as she takes it from your hand. If she's willing to come to you for it, she's earned it. Make her do more and more for the chicken... make her hop up on the footstool next to you, or onto your lap as you pet her and give her the chicken. Sometimes a cat likes to be brushed during this "chicken feeding" lesson. She will learn that she can trust you, and that food comes from you primarily. Still, only a dozen kibbles of dry food between these feedings. The eventual goal is to get her to trust you and hop up next to you or on your lap each time without hesitation.

One other goal at this time is to find out (besides casual petting,) where she likes to be touched most, and with what. I've had cats roll over for a neck scratch, or prefer back scratches, or behind the ear, or the armpits, or you find out they don't like to be touched on the belly. Some LOVE being brushed, some only on the face, and some don't like brushes at all. Try things until you find the one she goes nuts for. As you become happy with her behavior toward you, you can try giving her more kibble and less chicken. If she stops interacting with you though, you must cut back that food again. She will eventually bond with you through this process because you've provided a basic need (food) to her and you are so nice to her too. She will start to look forward to your visits.

When she is ready to "leave" her confinement room, let her out for an hour or two, or better yet shut her into a bedroom with you so she can slowly get used to the other rooms and smells one at a time. Don't let her rush out and hide. Keep it controlled, then put her back in her confinement for the rest of the night. It might take a few days just to work her out of her confinement room all day. She will appreciate going back to this "safe place" and will adjust much better to the rest of the house and any other cats this way. When she meets and gets hissed at by your other cat finally, just put her in her confinement room afterward where she will calm down much quicker. Your current cat/s will get used to her - but expect a little hissing, it's normal.

*"Give your cat a reason to love you and you'll reap the rewards of that love for a lifetime..."*

**Genesee County Animal Shelter**  
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