Introducing a New Cat to Your Other Cat(s)

Taking home another cat when you already have one or more can sometimes be traumatic. The cute animal you rescued from the shelter can turn into a hissing, cowering shadow and/or your existing cat can go ballistic. Even when you have adopted a second cat to keep a lonely first cat company, either because it has been acting bored or because you've recently lost an older cat that was the lonely one's best pal, there can be a period of adjustment that may be a bit unpleasant. However, it is usually worth it—cats are social and are good companions to each other when you are away at work.

The first thing to remember is that cats are both territorial and somewhat aggressive by nature. You need to keep in mind the difference between two cats sparring and working out their spaces, on the one hand, and two cats really hurting each other. Growling, hissing, chasing, smacking, and wrestling are all a normal part of cats playing and relating, though they may seem frightening to you. On the other hand, if one cat is being bloodied or if fur is being torn out, you may have a serious physical problem. If one cat is so dominant that the other hides all the time or is constantly being driven into corners or under furniture, then you have an emotional problem. If the two cats are trading swipes, if both are out and about in the house (even if somewhat aversive to each other), and if there are no serious behavioral problems (see below), then you can bet that any hostility will work itself out eventually and the cats will be fine.

Another thing to remember, in the situation where you are replacing a deceased cat with a new one, is that the new cat and your remaining older cat will probably not have the same relationship that the two older ones had. Cats are individuals. Don't expect the new cat to be an exact replica of the lost one. Enjoy the new and different interactions for what they are and you will all be much happier.

There are two basic philosophies for introducing a new cat: one is to just drop the new cat into the situation and let them "duke it out." The other is to try to introduce them more gradually in order to minimize the stress (and, maybe, the fighting). The latter takes more initial effort, and depending upon the cats' personalities may not be necessary. But it also may prevent difficulties from getting started.

Here are some tips for gradual introduction and/or for taking care of problems that may arise:

1. Keep the new cat in a separate room at first. An animal that goes from being kept in a small shelter cage to a whole house can be a bit overwhelmed at first, and allowing it to explore a somewhat smaller space at first will allow it to feel safe. Once introduced to the whole house, it may retreat to this room when it feels scared or uncertain. It is able to establish a safe haven. In addition, the two cats can learn each others' smells under the door instead of face to face. This reduces the element of confrontation until each has gotten used to the idea of the other's presence. Keep them separated for a couple of days, then allow them limited time together. For
instance, you might want to let both cats loose in the house while you are home, but separate them while you are at work. Gradually increase the time they are together.

2. When you do introduce them face to face, you might try putting a little vanilla extract on each cat’s nose or rubbing each cat’s nose with a bay leaf, so that they will smell alike to each other.

3. Give them separate litter boxes. If you keep the new cat in a separate room, you will already have done this, and you can eventually move the two boxes into the same space, and perhaps eventually consolidate them into one. Cats are territorial about litter boxes, especially if they are only indoor cats. If you DON’T start out with separate boxes, keep the idea in mind if one of your cats begins to have “accidents.” Often a second litter box will take care of this problem immediately.

4. Feed them on opposite sides of the kitchen, or whatever room you use. Again, cats are territorial about their food. This will cut down on squabbles.

5. Don’t punish cats for fighting. This will do no good and will only make the punished cat feel unloved and more angry. Separate them, but don’t add to the problem by being aggressive yourself. Also, don’t put yourself at risk for unnecessary scratches and bites. If two cats are going at it, separate them with a broom or other neutral object. Don’t swat at either of them; simply place the object between them. You can also try clapping your hands. Or squirting them with a stream of water from a water pistol or spray bottle. But grabbing at a truly frightened or aggressive animal will only get you bitten.

6. Be prepared to give it some time. Most animals will work out their relationships on their own, but this may not happen instantly. It may take a month or more for things to calm down, and it may take several months before cats are fully adjusted to each other.

7. Ultimately, it comes down to the happiness quotient. Even if your two (or more) cats don’t curl up together, they each may be perfectly content living in the same household. You only need to consider giving up the new cat if, after a time, there is serious physical or emotional harm occurring, and this is relatively rare.