

Cats on the Edge

RESOLVING FELINE AGGRESSION PART II

Two of the most dangerous types of feline aggression are fear/defensive aggression and redirected aggression. Due to the fear and high-arousal components of these types of aggression, deep multiple bites can occur.

Scaredy Cats

Crouched in a tight ball with ears pulled back against his head, Jitters spits and hisses at Alice, the new neighbor, as she enters the kitchen. While cooing sweet nothings to the cat, Alice reaches out to give the cornered cat a reassuring pat and...bam! Score one bite for the home team and one bloody hand for the visitor.

Feeling trapped, with no escape route available, Jitters displayed a common defensive behavior – fear aggression. This was not a stealth attack. In most cases, the cat will make his feelings known – as Jitters did – through vocalizations, such as growling, hissing and spitting and baring his teeth. His hunched-up body will be as tight as a spring, ready to dart forward for a quick bite or to roll over to expose punishing claws if these warnings are not heeded. Back off, and you will usually avoid attack.

While all cats are afraid of something, some cats have a lower threshold to stressors than others do and are more prone to aggressive reactions. For example, a well-socialized kitten who came from a healthy mother is generally more stable than one kept isolated from other people and animals. You can help your cat and avoid a replay of defensive aggression by first ascertaining what stresses him to a degree at which he feels he must protect himself. Is it new people, loud noises or a change in the environment? If so, try setting him up in a quiet part of the home when things get hectic and then make plans to begin a desensitization program as soon as things settle down.

First determine how close or how loud the fearful stimulus has to be to the cat to cause him concern. Your starting point should be just inside his comfort zone. If your cat is fearful of strangers who walk into the kitchen, have them begin by just poking their heads in the doorway or even standing a few feet outside. Ask them to avoid looking at the cat. If the cat does not appear stressed, reward him with a tasty morsel. Repeat the process a few times. When your cat acts comfortable in their presence, have them approach a step closer, utter a word or two or make an arm movement – something small. With repetition, the cat should connect the rewards to the appearance

of the formerly scary people and actually acclimate to, if not outright welcome, them. In severe cases, you may need to obtain an antianxiety product from your veterinarian or consult with an applied animal behaviorist before you begin.

The Next Best Thing

Redirected aggression may be the most dangerous type of aggression. This can occur when the cat becomes intensely aroused by a loud, startling noise; the sight, smell or sounds of another animal; or unfamiliar people or places. With adrenaline pumping, he yowls, growls, stares, stalks and attacks whoever happens to walk by. Caretakers who have experienced this fury firsthand often remark that they had to "peel the cat off." Overexcited, the cat can remain aroused and threatening for up to six hours. After one of these incidents, it is best to sequester the cat in a dark, quiet room or, if handling the cat is impossible, for the family to leave the home for several hours. The cat needs time to calm down and return to normal, or minor stimulation will reactivate the cat's aggression.

Redirected aggression attacks, dangerous as they are, are usually one-time events. Some sensitive cats, however, continue to overreact if the stimulus that sets them off is not removed. This stimulus varies in each situation. It could be a new cat who has moved into the backyard, or a son home from college who insists on playing basketball in the house. Removing the stray cat or confiscating the basketball would be the logical first step. In cases where the source of agitation cannot be removed, an attempt at desensitizing the cat to the stressor might be made. Due to the inherent danger in redirected aggression, this program is best carried out under the supervision of a behaviorist. Family members should be taught to avoid the cat if arousal signals are evident; but if the case is severe and the stressor cannot be removed, rehoming the cat into a less stressful environment may be necessary.

Fear and stress can push your placid cat over the edge and result in wounds to both your flesh and your relationship. By providing an escape route for your fearful feline, steering clear of your kitty-on-a-warpath, or, if necessary, implementing a desensitization program, your home will once again be a safe haven for all.

