

FELINE AGGRESSION - REDIRECTED AGGRESSION

What is it?

Redirected or misdirected aggression happens when the cat is in an arousing situation, but is unable to direct aggression toward the stimulus. For example, your cat is sitting on a windowsill and sees another cat out on the property. Your cat becomes very agitated, begins to focus on the other cat and shows aggressive body postures, hisses, or growls. If a person or animal in the home were to walk into the room, they may be the recipient of an aggressive attack. When this happens between resident cats, sometimes they will no longer tolerate being together and fight whenever they see each other. The initial stimulus that arouses the cat is most frequently another cat, but it could be any sight, sound, or a source of discomfort that leads to a heightened level of anxiety,

What should I do if that happens?

First, avoid the cat until it calms down. If the aggression is being redirected toward a second cat in the household, the two cats may have to be separated. In some cats this separation may only need a few minutes, but it is not unusual for it to take hours. In rare cases it may take several days or the cat may remain aggressive. This is most likely if the redirected aggression was met with retaliation, punishment or other form of fearful event (perhaps in an effort to separate the cat from the victim). In addition if the attack leads to a change in relationship between the cat and the victim (fear, defensiveness) then the aggression may persist. The best way to calm an agitated cat is to put the cat in a darkened room and leave it there. If locking up the aggressor is dangerous, it may be necessary to use a large blanket, a thick pair of gloves, or a water pistol or can of compressed air to safely maneuver the cat into the room. If the problem is recurrent, leaving a body harness with a long leash attached to the cat can be a safe way to control the cat from a distance without the need for direct contact. Some cats may need to be kept in the room anywhere from several minutes to several days, The owner can go in, turn on the light, offer food to the cat, and if the cat remains fearful or does not accept the food, the owner should turn out the lights and leave. If the aggression has been directed toward a second cat in the home it is very important to wait until the cats are calm before re-introducing them. The biggest mistake that owners make in trying to resolve this problem is to try and bring the cats together too soon.

How should I get my cats back together again?

Re-introductions are best done slowly. Use food to facilitate calm, non-anxious behavior. The cats need to be far enough apart (10 to 20 feet) so that they are relaxed and will take food or a treat while in the presence of the other cat. For safety and control it is often advisable that the cats have harnesses and leashes on them if the cats will not eat then they are too anxious and probably too close together. Try moving the dishes further apart. If the cats still will not eat, separate them until the next feeding. If the cats eat at that time, allow them to remain together while they eat and then separate them. Repeat the same distance the next feeding, If things go well the next time the dishes can be moved slightly closer together. If the cats are comfortable, you can leave them together to let them groom and then separate them.

This is a slow process- you cannot rush things. Allowing the cat to interact in an aggressive manner sets the program back. The cats are separated except when they are distracted, occupied, and engaged in an enjoyable act (feeding). Good things are associated with the presence of the other cat. It also may be helpful to switch litter pans between the cats. Another technique is to rub the cats with towels and switch from one to the other, mixing their scents. If the aggression has not been severe it may be possible to get the cats reacclimated to one another through play. The best toy is a rod-type handle with a catnip mouse or feathers on the end for chasing and pouncing. With each cat on either side of a slightly open door introduce the toy and see if they will play with each other.

Another possible way to re-introduce cats is with the use of a crate. Place one cat in the crate while the other cat is loose in the room. This might best be done at feeding or play times. Allow the cats to become comfortable with the presence of one another. Then the next time switch occupants of the crate.

If the problem is severe, one or both of the cats may need to be medicated. This is a step that needs to be discussed with your veterinarian and all the risks and benefits explored.

Can redirected aggression be directed towards people?

Yes. When redirected aggression is directed toward people the problem has often arisen because the people interacted with the cat when it was very agitated. Avoidance of the aggression-producing situation is necessary. Situations include the sight or sound of intruder cats on the property, especially in the spring and fall, new people or pets in the household, loud or unusual noises and a variety of other new or novel stimuli that are sometimes difficult to identify. If the situation cannot be entirely avoided then the owner must learn to avoid the cat, or find a safe way to maneuver the cat into a quiet room until it calms down, as previously discussed.

How can redirected aggression toward people be treated?

Resolving the aggression requires that the source of the agitation be identified and avoided. Since redirected aggression arises out of some other form of aggression that is then directed toward people, identifying and treating the primary source of aggression (e.g. territorial, fear) is required. Avoiding exposure can be achieved by confining your cat away from the doors and windows, where the stimulus might be seen, heard, or smelled. Keep it out of the room (this may only be necessary at times when the stimuli, such as other cats, are likely to be around) or use booby-traps such as electronic mats, Snappy Trainers, or motion detectors to keep your cat away from the doors and windows, installing vertical blinds or shutters, or placing sticky tape or upside down carpet runners along the windowsills or in front of the doorway may be sufficient. Alternately remove the stimulus or keep an intruder off the property by using repellents or outdoor boobytraps such as ultrasonic devices or motion detector alarms or sprinklers. Keeping garbage locked up and removing bird feeders can reduce the chances that animals will enter your property and disturb your cat. If it is not practical to prevent exposing your cat to the stimulus, it might be possible to reduce the anxiety

and arousal with drug therapy along with a desensitization and counter-conditioning program. Discuss this with your veterinarian.