

FELINE AGGRESSION

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around my calf. I screamed—not because it was all that painful at that moment, but

— When Good Cats Attack —

Over the years I've written about petting aggression and play aggression in cats. But in this article, I'd like to address one other form of feline aggression, and it's one that can be very frightening, as well as damaging, for cat parents. This form of aggression is called redirected aggression, and it happens when a cat is agitated by an animal, event, or person it can't get at. Unable to lash out at the perceived threat, the cat turns to the nearest victim. This may be another cat or pet in the household, or it may be the cat's humans. These attacks happen seemingly out of the blue, and they can be fairly damaging to the victim.

Redirected aggression is not unique to cats. The human equivalent is the man who gets so angry he wants to punch someone, and ends up punching a wall instead. Most commonly, redirected aggression is triggered when indoor cats see a strange cat outside the window. Since they consider their home their territory, the outside cat is perceived as an intruder. Other triggers can include smelling a strange cat on the owner's hands or clothing, being frightened by something or someone, coming back inside after accidentally getting outside if the cat is normally an indoor cat, or even watching birds and lizards outside.

This kind of attack is often described by cat guardians as coming "out of nowhere." However, from the cat's perspective, there is always a trigger. It is important to understand that these attacks are not malicious, or even intentional on

the cat's part. The cat simply reacts to a perceived threat.

I've only experienced this once with one of my cats, and thankfully, it was an isolated incident.

Feebee and I were standing by my sliding glass door looking out into the backyard. I even remember talking to him. All of a sudden, I felt his jaws clamp

because I was so startled. A second ago he was sitting next to me, peacefully looking out the window. Now I saw a puffed up, hissing little grey monster next to me. I slowly walked away, and within about 30 seconds, he calmed down and acted normal again. He had left two deep puncture wounds in my calf. I don't remember seeing anything we hadn't seen before, but clearly, he had. Of all the types of feline aggression, this is the most difficult form to deal with, because it may not always be possible to identify the trigger, and because, unlike with petting or play aggression, there's usually no warning from the cat in terms of body language because these attacks happen so fast. It becomes especially difficult when the attack is directed at another cat in the household, because in most cases, the triggered cat will continue to be aggressive toward the victim.

If this is the case, the first order of business is to temporarily separate the cats. Use their natural pheromones to remind them that they "know" each other. You can do this by rubbing a sock or washcloth against the side of one cat's face, then leave the sock or cloth with the other cat, and vice versa. Pheromone plugins or sprays like Feliway may also help.

Slowly start reintroducing the two cats to each other. Follow the same steps you would follow with two cats that have never met. Depending on your cats, and how severely triggered the aggressor was, this can take weeks and sometimes months.



If you know what triggered the aggressive episode, remove the trigger. For example, if an outside cat continues to come near your windows and upsets your cats, close the blinds, or make your yard unattractive to other cats. Ultrasonic deterrent devices like the CatStop,



or motion activated sprinklers like the ScareCrow keep other cats out of the yard without harming them. If you don't know the trigger, and the episodes happen again, you've got your work cut out for you. Remain vigilant when you are at home, and in time, you may be able to identify the cause of redirected aggression. The most unusual case I've seen was a client who lived in a small apartment with three cats who got along wonderfully, until a new mattress was delivered. One

of the cats became very scared during the delivery and installation, and for reasons known only to the other two cats, they turned on the scared cat. It took a few weeks of separating the cats, along with the use of Feliway and flower essences, to return harmony to the household. Feline aggression is a serious problem. If simple behaviour modification doesn't work, consult with a veterinarian to rule out medical or neurological issues, and/or consult with a feline behaviourist.

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